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Doing Ethics.

**An outline of a constructivist and
phenomenological approach of moral
communication**

Martina Drescher, 2024

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African Studies
WORKING PAPERS

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approach of moral communication**



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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to explore moralities in relation with language. Based on a phenomenological, constructivist and dynamic understanding of moralities as 'doing ethics' which is informed by recent sociological and anthropological research, I sketch a theoretical framework that is situated at the crossroads of pragmatics and interactional linguistics. In order to capture the linguistic and communicative facets of everyday moralities, I make the case that the latter are best conceptualized as an interactional achievement. My focus is on the verbal means and communicative practices conventionally used to signal moral meanings in everyday moral communication.

Keywords: Moral communication, doing ethics, moral practices, ethical affordances, socially evaluative statements

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Doing ethics.

An outline of a constructivist and phenomenological approach of moral communication¹

Martina Drescher

1 Introduction

Situated at the crossroads of pragmatics and interactional linguistics, the aim of the present paper is to sketch a theoretical framework that is able to capture the linguistic and communicative facets of everyday moralities. Based on a phenomenological, constructivist and dynamic understanding which is informed by recent sociological and anthropological research, I make the case that moralities are best conceptualized as an interactional achievement, in other words, as ‘doing ethics’.² Moreover, I argue that communication plays a major role in doing ethics. Hence, I explore moralities in relation with language. The focus is on everyday moral communication and, in particular, on the verbal means and communicative practices conventionally used to signal moral meanings. My main purpose is to flesh out a conceptualization of doing ethics which opens up this domain for pragmatic and interactional approaches. Thus, theoretical considerations are prevalent here.

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² Despite an identical denomination, our understanding of ‘doing ethics’ as a situated practice, clearly differs from the one Vaughn (2008) sketches out in his introduction to applied ethics. In his monograph on *Doing ethics. Moral reasoning and contemporary issues* he defines ‘doing ethics’ as “the application of moral norms to specific moral issues or cases” (Vaughn 2008: 6) such as abortion, animal rights or capital punishment. Here, ‘doing ethics’ means to “use critical reasoning to discern moral norms” (Vaughn 2008: 12).

The following section situates this endeavour in the context of a larger research cluster located at the University of Bayreuth (sec. 2). Then, I bring into view some of the issues a linguistic conceptualization of moralities must cope with (sec. 3). The next section starts with a review of pertinent sociological and anthropological work. Against this background, I set out my own understanding of moral communication (sec. 4). Section 5 is dedicated to a discussion of linguistic means and communicative practices which may function as ‘ethical affordances’. Next, I distinguish between moral talk and talk about moral as two manifestations of moral communication (sec. 6). Finally, I focus on socially evaluative statements which constitute an important semantic feature of moral communication. A brief conclusion summarizes the main arguments (sec. 8).

2 Doing Ethics

At first glance, moralities are not a true linguistic research field. Yet, my interest in this topic was sparked by a cooperation with colleagues in the Research Section (RS) “Moralities” as part of the Cluster of Excellence Africa Multiple at the University of Bayreuth. This interdisciplinary RS brings together scholars from religious studies, social geographers and linguists who share a descriptive and praxeological approach of ethics or moralities – two concepts we use interchangeably³ – as emerging and as intrinsic to social life and action. Hence, we conceptualise ethics as part of, and emerging in, everyday interaction, in short as doing ethics. The RS pursues “two central objectives: first to describe and analyse modes of doing ethics, and second to examine the ways these shape, and are shaped by processes of social transformation and future-oriented perspectives” (IAS 2018: 48). In order to achieve these goals, the RS adopts “three methodological perspectives on communicating, negotiating and practicing moralities” (IAS 2018: 47).

The RS “Moralities” also sets the framework for a research project on “Health discourses as moral communication? Linguistic case studies from Côte d’Ivoire and Cameroon” that started in 2019 (Drescher et al. 2022, 2023). Our research is especially concerned with the first objective, that is, the modes of doing ethics. As linguists, we put a spotlight on the communicative facets of doing ethics, but also contribute to the two other perspectives by considering each interaction as a form of negotiation where the participants make use of communicative practices in order to bring about moral meanings.⁴ In other words, we analyse “how moralities are communicatively produced, investigate the verbal means through which moral claims and judgements are constructed and conveyed, and study in what kinds of communicative settings they are communicated and eventually become public” (IAS 2018: 49f.). Even though nonverbal and material practices form an important part of doing ethics, our focus is on verbal activities and thus on communicative

³ Cf. Martin (2020) for an analysis of the French concepts *morale* and *éthique* from the perspective of diachronic linguistics.

⁴ For Bourdieu, linguistic practices constitute a subtype of practices which are habitual social activities: “Linguistic utterances or expressions are forms of practice and, as such, can be understood as the product of the relation between a linguistic habitus and a linguistic market” (Thompson 1991: 17). Interactional linguists, however, propose a more specific definition which I embrace here: “practices are characterized by the context-sensitive use of certain verbal and communicative forms as resources for the solution of fundamental tasks of the interaction’s constitution and for the accomplishment of specific activities” (Deppermann et al. 2016: 1). – All translations of German and French quotes are mine, except as noted otherwise.

practices that convey moral meanings. We are interested in questions such as: How is doing ethics achieved in interaction? Are there interactive settings and situations that typically foster moral discourse? How does moral discourse affect social relationships? Are there interdependencies between moral communication and interpersonal dynamics, especially power configurations? Which features are typical of moral communication? Which are the linguistic forms and communicative practices, people typically use to key moral meanings, to index moral concerns and to display moral stance? By examining the emergence of moralities in interaction, we aim to contribute to a better understanding of the linguistic and communicative aspects and to bring in a linguistic perspective in the conceptualisation of doing ethics.

3 Moralities In Linguistics And Beyond

In philosophy, theology, and in the social sciences (sociology, psychology, anthropology, etc.) a long-standing research tradition on ethics and moralities exists. According to Pieper, philosophical research in ethics and moralities generally clusters around three thematic angles: happiness, freedom, and good and evil (*Glück(seligkeit), Freiheit, Gut und Böse*) (Pieper 2017: 138). Here, the term 'morality' generally designates a praxis, whereas 'ethics' constitutes the science of this praxis ("Wissenschaft von dieser Praxis") or is considered as "the theory of the moral praxis" (Pieper 2017: 25). However, no terminological consensus exists since, according to Spencer-Bennett, philosophers often distinguish between *morality* as the universal, normative rules of conduct, the "decontextualised and abstracted systems that tell us what is right and wrong" and *ethics* as the more contextually and socially sensitive orientation to well-being, "the normative dimensions of life as it is lived by particular people in particular times and places" (Spencer-Bennett 2018: 117). Since there is no coherent use, I consider both terms as synonyms, but clearly concentrate on the praxis, that is on the local moral worlds with their context- and group specific norms and socially expectable codes of conduct. For this reason, I prefer to speak of 'moralities' instead of 'morality' since the plural better captures the multiplicity of existing moral worlds.⁵ Furthermore, morality or ethics are often defined as a complex of inner attitudes, as the totality of beliefs of good/right and bad/wrong steering morally correct action, or as a hierarchically structured system of values and norms, standards and rules. It goes without saying that such an understanding is not really appropriate for a study of morality as a primarily communicative phenomenon.

Linguists, by contrast, have not shown much interest in moral communication so far. The topic is at the edges of the discipline so that one rather encounters uncharted territory without much relevant research to build on. This might be due to the difficulty to conceive of ethics or morality in a way that they can be analysed with linguistic tools. As a consequence, moralities in their relation to language are an intriguing, but also challenging field of research which remains still fairly under-investigated. On the whole, there is both a lack of theorizing in the language sciences, and a lack of empirical studies. Among the few scholars who embrace this challenge, Paveau notes

⁵ Bergmann and Luckmann (1999a, b) argue that social transformations and especially modernization processes have led to a fragmentation of moral standards and the formation of multiple ethical values. This "process of dispersion of morality" also altered its social form (*Sozialgestalt*), since morality escaped into the communicative. As a consequence, we encounter morality today rather in the more mundane everyday forms of social interaction than in social institutions (Bergmann and Luckmann 1999a: 21).

that most linguists seem embarrassed by ethical questions and prefer to exclude “the axiology, especially the moral one, from the realm of language sciences” (Paveau 2013: 265). However, in her monograph on language and morality, she concentrates mainly on discursive virtues and the “social morality of speech” (Paveau 2013: 15), that is on (moral) language use. While her focus is on politically correct speech, she also envisions an ethics for linguistics as a discipline.

Other researchers even doubt that linguistics can contribute to the study of moral discourse. Van Leeuwen (2008: 110) remarks that discourses of moral value are generally not explicit and debatable, but only hinted at, for instance, by means of adjectives that “are the tip of a submerged iceberg of moral values”. He concludes:

As a result, it is not possible to find an explicit, linguistically motivated method for identifying moral evaluations of this kind. As discourse analysts, we can only ‘recognize’ them, on the basis of our *common sense* cultural knowledge. The usefulness of linguistic discourse analysis stops at this point (van Leeuwen 2008: 110).

Although I agree that the study of moralities poses a challenge to linguistics, I am less pessimistic. Even if inferences and implicitness were crucial for moral communication, this does not necessarily mean that it becomes un-researchable or inaccessible for linguists. This view is corroborated by Spencer-Bennett’s (2018) monograph on *Moral talk. Stance and evaluation in political discourse* that concentrates precisely on linguistic indicators of morality in English. In addition, a series of studies that are based on German data provides stimulating insights in the interactional and genre-specific facets of moral communication (Bergmann and Luckmann 1999b; Günthner 2000).

The relatively scarce work in the field of language and communication, contrasts with a wealth of research carried out in the last two decades in the social sciences, in particular in sociology and anthropology, but also in cognitive science. Since the 1990s, we have witnessed a growing interest in the “moral order” (Jayyusi 1984), in “moral imagination” (Johnson 1993), “moral communication” (Bergmann and Luckmann 1999a), “ordinary ethics” (Sidnell 2011; Das 2012), “moral anthropology” (Fassin 2012), an “anthropology of ethics” (Lambek 2015), or the “ethical life”, defined as “the ethics that runs quietly through ordinary everyday activities” (Keane 2017: 10). By contrast to the philosophical or normative tradition, these authors share a descriptive perspective on ethics or moralities. Furthermore, they show an interest in everyday morality and its mundane practices by looking at the “truly lived, trivial, omnipresent morality of everyday life” (Bergmann and Luckmann 1999a: 17). At the same time, they stress the multiple entanglements between ethics and language and hence its genuinely verbal fabric. Therefore, this strand of research can make substantial contributions to a linguistic and communicative conceptualization of moralities as a praxis emerging in interaction, that is as moral communication (Drescher 2020, 2022, forthcoming).

4 Moral Communication

There is no doubt that moralities are a key factor of social life and hence a fundamentally interactional phenomenon. Garfinkel already observed that for a society's members the "natural facts of life' [...] are through and through moral facts of life" (Garfinkel 1967: 35). In a similar way, Goffman argues that "what the individual spends most of his spoken moments doing is providing evidence 5 spar fairness or unfairness of his current situation and other grounds for sympathy, approval, exoneration, understanding, or amusement" (Goffman 1976: 503). For Jayyusi (1991: 246), "(T)here is no exit from the moral order", since moral is "a pervasive and constituent feature" 5 spar social praxis. She hints at "the foundational character of morality in organizing the ongoing praxis of members in the social world" (Jayyusi 1984: 211). Along the same lines, the philosopher and cognitive linguist Johnson notes that "morality reaches, in varying degrees, into most aspects of our lives" (Johnson 1993: 252) and thus "pervades all aspects of our experience" (Johnson 1993: 160). According to Lambek the "*human condition is an ethical condition*" (Lambek 2015: X) which means that, "fundamentally, *human beings live in worlds in which it is impossible not to evaluate action with respect 5 spar good*" (Lambek 2015: XVII). Such "an ethics out 5 spar ordinary" or "ordinary ethics" (Lambek 2015: 267ff.) 5 spar and parcel of our lives.

However, it is precisely the ubiquitousness and relevance of moral values and norms in everyday life that promotes their habituation to such an extent that they tend to become invisible. Or – as Garfinkel puts it – a "society's members encounter and know the moral order as perceivedly normal course of action" (Garfinkel 1967: 35). Due to their habitualness in social interactions, moralities tend to become a blind spot. Bergmann (1998: 280) draws our attention to this problem: "Morality is such a common and intrinsic quality of everyday social interaction that it is usually invisible to us" (Bergmann 1998: 280). He further explicates: "Obviously, morality is omnipresent in everyday life; it is so deeply intertwined with everyday discourse that the interlocutors hardly ever recognize their doings as moral business" (Bergmann 1998: 281). In a similar way, philosopher Pieper reminds us that moral systems "play a large role in the everyday praxis, in the dealings with fellow human beings, in the interpersonal relationships, without most people being explicitly aware how much their communicative behaviour is determined, even regulated by such morals" (Pieper 2017: 32). Along the same lines, Hare states:

Practical principles, if they are accepted sufficiently long and unquestioningly, come to have the force of intuition. Thus our ultimate moral principles can become so completely accepted by us, that we treat them, not as universal imperatives, but as matters of fact; they have the same obstinate indubitability (Hare 1952: 165).

In short, morality's overall presence comes along with its habitualness which eventually leads to its invisibility in social interaction. This is, of course, an analytical challenge not only for social scientists, but also for linguists.

Yet, morality is something which must be made and not something one just finds (Tugendhat 1993: 43). In my theoretical conceptualisation I thus draw on approaches which conceive of morality as brought about in communicative praxis, that is as the interactants' interactional achievement. In her ethnomethodological approach, Lena Jayyusi underlines the "foundational character of morality in organizing the ongoing praxis of members in the social world" (Jayyusi

1984: 211). So as to seize its dynamic and processual nature, she coins the expression “doing morality” (Jayyusi 1984, 1991) which is very alike to our concept of ‘doing ethics’. While conceiving morality first and foremost as a communicative praxis, she further states that “it is the very structure of our language and speech, as well as the logic of our activities, the *weave of our practices*, that generates the possibility of divergent moralities, of both agreement and disagreement” (Jayyusi 1984: 19). Along the same lines, Bergmann (2004: 31) claims that there are no moral phenomena as such, but only moral communication about phenomena. The moral meaning of an event or a state of affair is brought about constantly and co-constructively by the participants. Hence, morality is entirely dissolved in situated communicative practices and conceptualized, not from the inside world of the subject, but from the communicative outside world of the action (Bergmann 2004: 29). From this angle, morality no longer constitutes an element of the subject’s interior world, but is conceived as the participants’ communicative co-construction. It follows that morality is inherent to discourse: “The claim that morality is building on and growing out of the basic structure of discourse is supported by language itself. In dealing with discourse we are obviously always dealing with morality too” (Bergmann 1998: 285). Morality is deeply embedded in interaction. In Luhmann’s (2008: 116) words: it has an *Interaktionsbindung*, i.e. a fundamental bond with interaction. Such an understanding implies necessarily the situatedness of moral meanings which are always subject to negotiation.

Recent research in anthropology also emphasizes the importance of communication and language in relation to moralities. For Lambek (2015), ethics and language are intimately interwoven. While stressing their deep entanglements, he also intends to clarify their different levels of interdependency by drawing on de Saussure nowadays classical dichotomy of *langue* and *parole*. Against this backdrop, he further differentiates between moral’s impact on lexicon and language structure on the one hand, and the use of moral language on the other hand: “Language is central to the ethical and the ethical to language, both to language in the abstract, in the sense of grammar and semantics (*langue*), and to acts of speaking, pragmatics, and metapragmatics (*parole*)” (Lambek 2015: 252). Ethics is of course not restricted to language and speech as Lambek underlines: “I take ethics as pertaining to the intentions, qualifications, and consequences of human speech and action” (Lambek 2015: X). But verbal interactions are certainly a privileged space for the emergence of moralities and speech represents both a prominent and fundamental form of doing ethics: “For social interactions are the natural home of justifications, excuses, accusations, reasons, praise, blame, and all the other ways in which ethics comes to be made explicit” (Keane 2017: 26). In short, social interaction and *a fortiori* moral communication constitute the core of ethical life.

5 Linguistic Means And Communicative Practices As Ethical Affordances

Defining moralities as a communicative construction implies the existence of verbal means and structures which make moral meanings recognizable and thus interpretable as such. A phenomenological, constructivist, and dynamic understanding of doing ethics necessarily draws on conventionalized signs and practices which make moral meanings intelligible for others and thus socially relevant:

‘Morality’, ‘moral values’, ‘moral positions’, ‘moral beliefs’ are not invisibly locked into the minds and feelings of persons. Rather, they are routinely displayed and available publicly in the very same instance as intentions and beliefs. In the very display and public availability of actions-intentions and beliefs, in the very performance of actions and the very organization of talk, moral positions, values and stances are displayable and publicly available (Jayyusi 1984: 210).

Similarly, Keane insists that

for the psychology of ethics to have a full social existence, it must be manifest in ways that are *taken to be* ethical by someone. Ethics must be embodied in certain palpable media such as words or deeds or bodily habits. The ethical implications must be at least potentially recognizable to other people (Keane 2017: 35).

It is precisely the assumption of palpable media and the focus on the display of moral stances and values that opens up the study of moralities for pragmatic, interactional and discourse analytical approaches. If moral activities, attitudes and values are signalled by conventionalized symbolic, in particular verbal, forms and structures, then linguistic studies are called upon to explore the multiple relations between language and moralities.

However, identifying distinct formal or structural features turns out to be a fairly difficult task since a multitude of linguistic means converge in keying moral discourse. Obviously, moral meanings are rather holistic, implicit, and context-sensitive. Furthermore, there is no unequivocal, one-to-one relation between a specific linguistic form or structure and a moral meaning or function. Rather, a range of verbal devices which show a *potential* for keying moral meanings exist. On a more general level, Keane coins the concept *ethical affordance* in order to capture the potential of an experience to be morally loaded. He suggests the following, quite broad definition: “By *ethical affordance* I mean any aspects of people’s experiences and perceptions that they might draw on in the process of making ethical evaluations and decisions, whether consciously or not”. (Keane 2017: 27). Later he specifies: “*Ethical affordance* refers to the opportunities that any experiences might offer as people evaluate themselves, other persons, and their circumstances” (Keane 2017: 31). Hence, ethical affordances are “candidates for being treated as ethical” (Keane 2017: 44). The concept seems quite appealing. However, for linguistic purposes it must be narrowed down to the conventionalized verbal means and communicative practices with a potential for doing ethics. The latter ensure the “public locatability of moral position and value stance” (Jayyusi 1984: 211) by making activities visible and interpretable as ethical. It should be emphasized that affordances are necessarily situated practices. In other words, their potential can

only be activated in a specific context. The mere analysis of words which are colloquially used to express a moral intention is not sufficient, but only the “praxis-related use of a word in the language game” (Pieper 2017: 195). Moral meanings always emerge in a specific context: “‘Naughty’ words can be neutralized, and seemingly neutral and innocent expressions may in the course of an interaction acquire a moral meaning and may be treated in a moral frame of reference” (Bergmann 1998: 281). Ultimately, the use in a specific context decides whether the moral potential of a word really unfolds or not.⁶ Moral words function at most as beacons that hint at sequences where doing ethics may become relevant. From this it follows that the distinction between *langue* and *parole* suggested by Lambek with regard to ordinary ethics does not really make sense on a practical level, since moral meanings are always context-specific and, as a matter of principle, they thus belong to the realm of *parole*.

6 Moral Talk Versus Talk About Moral

Ethical affordances are probably – at least partly – language- and culture-specific. Yet, specific linguistic devices, speech acts or genres seem to be more predisposed than others to indicate moral meanings and to display moral stance.⁷ Some interjections certainly belong to this category. Among the activities with moral potential are complaints, reproaches and indignations (Bergmann and Luckmann 1999a; Günthner 2000), but also ‘teaching activities’ (Keppler and Luckmann 1991) just to name a few. Narratives generally show a propensity to doing ethics; in particular sermons, gossip or rumour are morally loaded (Bergmann 2022; Drescher 2023). Organizational features of interaction may also be instrumentalized for moral purposes. Obviously, a close relationship between ordinary ethics and turn-taking in conversation exists.⁸ For mechanisms such as the turn-taking machinery are not “merely technical means of traffic control and consensus establishment. Independent of technical functions, they offer affordances that people can draw on as they evaluate one another” (Keane 2017: 109). In short, moral communication relies on a multiplicity of verbal means and communicative practices which – besides indicating moral meanings – may also fulfil other discursive functions. Moreover, people convey moral meanings often rather allusively. As Bergmann underlines, “the moral character of an utterance is often not formulated at all but indicated by emblems, prosody, and other paraverbal means” (Bergmann 1998: 288). Indirectness thus seems to be a fundamental feature of moral communication which could at least partly be due to its high potential for conflict. Moral communication is inherently *polemogen* (Luhmann 2008: 111), that is, it boosts polemic, may stir dispute and aggravate disagreement: “For this reason, the moral impulse mostly chooses the path of indirect communication, of mere allusion, of letting it be known that questions of respect are involved in certain topics. An open moralization [...] is always also an [...] offer of conflict” (Luhmann 2008: 112).

⁶ Similar to “contextualization cues” (Gumperz 1992) in terms of their indexical quality, ethical affordances could be considered as a specific (sub-)type specialized in signalling moral meanings.

⁷ Cf. Spencer-Bennett (2018: 52ff.) who provides in chapter 3 “Form: what counts as moral talk?” a synopsis of relevant phenomena in English. However, if we agree that the moral potential of verbal devices is highly context-dependent, lists of ‘moral forms’ do not really make sense, unless one considers them as affordances which still have to be instantiated.

⁸ Cf. Sidnell (2011).

Besides the indirect modes of doing ethics, less frequent, but more striking cases where people overtly discuss moral issues also exist. Therefore, one can further distinguish “between talk *about moral matters*, and talk whose immediate character or point is the making of moral judgments, and talk involving, invoking and using moral concepts and morally organized procedures” (Jayyusi 1984: 204). When moral issues constitute the topic, moral attitudes and principles get disclosed and are explicitly addressed. A case in point are moral dilemma where people find themselves thrown in dynamic situations, characterized by competing moral norms as well as conflicting requirements. Hence, before making a decision they may consider various goals and expectations, ponder different goods, and weigh varying moral values. Therefore, moral dilemma frequently results in moral deliberation, that is an “exploration of possibilities for acting within a morally problematic situation” (Johnson 1993: 149). Moral deliberations comprise a process of decision-making, a weighing of pros and cons, of alternative options, against the background of moral principles. Since they lay open norms and values which otherwise may stay implicit, moral deliberations offer valuable insights in the dynamics of doing ethics and thus represent a good starting point for linguistic investigations of moral communication. However, it is uncommon to encounter moral talk in its pure form. In general, it overlaps with other kinds of talk and may be part of many different activities and formats.

7 Between Good And Bad: Socially Evaluative Statements

So far, the omnipresence of moralities in everyday activities and the importance of communication as the scene where moral meanings emerge have been emphasized. In addition, the dynamic and context-sensitive nature of ethical affordances as the verbal means and communicative practices that display moral meanings has been highlighted. Yet, a conceptualization of doing ethics must also take into account a significant semantic feature of moral meanings, namely their fundamentally evaluative nature. From the three main themes Pieper (2017: 138) identified in philosophical theories, the dichotomy of good and evil clearly takes the centre stage in dealing with moral communication. Obviously, what characterizes moralities most, is their evaluative core. Although “description and appraisal are, in fact, deeply intertwined” (Jayyusi 1991: 233), there is a broad consensus that moral utterances have a strongly evaluative tone. Evaluations in terms of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ form the basis for moral judgements, also termed “socially evaluating statements”.

Luhmann (2008: 216) already highlighted that social evaluations in terms of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ or ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ constitute a fundamental characteristic of moral communication. He defines moral communication as implicit or explicit *Achtungskommunikation*, that is as communication of respect or disrespect. Respect is the “principle of morality which exposes itself to communication in the societal system and in so doing respecifies itself” (Luhmann 2008: 107). Respect or disrespect become manifest in “socially evaluating statements” (*sozial wertende Stellungnahmen*). Socially evaluating statements range from respect to disrespect. They are not limited to evaluative statements in the narrow sense. Rather they include all kind of activities with evaluative tonalities such as accusation, blame, complaint, criticism, indignation, praise, etc. that display respect or disrespect. From this definition in relation to respect and not – as it is common in philosophy – to norms and standards claiming general validity, arises morality’s *Interaktionsbindung*, its fundamental bond with interaction. According to Bergmann and Luckmann who also argue that

explicit or implicit socially evaluating statements are constitutive features of moral communication, they “refer to actions or persons and are prone to damage or to increase the respect, the image, the honour or the reputation of the named or identifiable persons” (Bergmann and Luckmann 1999a: 23). As already mentioned, moral communication is not limited to cases where moral issues are overtly talked about. Rather, it always occurs when a conversation shows moments of respect or disrespect, that is a person’s social evaluation, and in addition when there is a reference to dichotomous ideas of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ or ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ that transcend the current situation (Bergmann 2004: 32). Respect or disrespect may be shown directly or indirectly and the socially evaluating statements may concern (passed or current) actions of (present or absent) persons. Given their importance, it does not come as a surprise that evaluations also figure prominently among the invariant structures of a potentially universal “proto-moral” (Bergmann and Luckmann 1999a: 24).

For Keane too, social evaluations are at the core of ethical life, since “humans are the kind of creatures that are prone to evaluate themselves, others, and their circumstances” (Keane 2017: 6). They show “a basic propensity to evaluate people and their actions as good or bad” (Keane 2017: 45). Hence, our social existence is saturated “with evaluations of persons, their relations, and their actions” (Keane 2017: 100), in short with moral judgements. Keane adopts Haidt’s definition for whom moral judgements are “evaluations (good vs. bad) of the actions or character of a person that are made with respect to a set of virtues held to be obligatory by a culture or subculture” (Haidt 2001: 817). Haidt, in turn, underlines the *relational* nature of moral judgment and claims that it “should be studied as an interpersonal process” (Haidt 2001: 814), since it “is not just a single act that occurs in a single person’s mind but is an ongoing process, often spread out over time and over multiple people” (Haidt 2001: 828). He thus promotes a relational approach of ethics very much in line with our understanding of doing ethics as an interactional achievement.

It should be clear from what has been set out previously that not any evaluation is morally loaded. Spencer-Bennett asserts that language is a chief “*instrument* of ethical judgement” (Spencer-Bennett 2018: 34). Yet, he has to admit that it may be difficult to pinpoint “what evaluative language counts as being *morally* evaluative in particular” (Spencer-Bennett 2018: 52). Obviously, for moral judgements not all modes of evaluation are relevant. The specific context, in particular the existence of a moral frame, is vital.⁹ However, more important for an evaluation’s moral tinge is its reference to an agent (*Akteursbezug*): “The evaluation has to refer – directly or indirectly – to an agent or a group of agents” (Bergmann and Luckmann 1999a: 26). In addition, socially evaluating statements often contain an emotive shade (Drescher 2003). Not least, evaluations also possess a directive force since they may be meant and understood as prescriptions: “Moral judgments, even if they do not have the form of imperatives but of value-statements, are normative judgments, that is, judgments which explicitly or implicitly command a state of affairs asserted to be valuable (or proscribe its inexistence or its opposite” (Pieper 2017: 152). Utterances in the indicative mood such as value-judgments also contain, albeit in a covert form, a

⁹ According to Goffman social frameworks “provide background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency, the chief one being the human being” (Goffman 1976: 22). A moral dimension is inherent to any social frame. If it is set relevant, one can speak of a moral frame.

prompt to act (Pieper 2017: 40). Similarly, Hare (1952: 1) states that moral language is prescriptive in essence, and commands, as well as value-judgments, are the two main instruments for prescribing. Their momentum for societal transformation and shaping the future originates beyond doubt in the directive force inherent to moralities as such: “Morality is not about reflecting the world, but about changing it; it is about principles of action, about choices and accountability” (Pieper 2017: 46).

8 Conclusion

Starting from the assumption that moralities are constitutive of everyday interactions, I centred my attention on their communicative facets. Drawing on constructivist and phenomenological theories, I conceived of moralities as doing ethics and focused on moral communication. While carving out the specificities of moral communication, I highlighted the context-sensitive nature of verbal means and communicative practices functioning as ethical affordances. Whereas some of these affordances have already been analysed in languages such as English, German or French, the ethical potential of others still waits to be explored. So far, there has been a particular focus on morally loaded speech activities such as complaints and accusations, and recently also advice (Drescher forthcoming). However, we still need more data-based studies to better understand the mechanisms of moral communication. Here, a holistic approach that focuses on the interaction between verbal and – depending of course on the data – nonverbal devices, appears more appropriate than a study of specific phenomena in isolation. Since moral communication is often indirect, the related inferential processes deserve particular attention. At this point, the idea of (moral) frames that we owe to Goffman (1976) allows us to both examine verbal and communicative devices in their interplay, and to analyse the emergence and dynamics of moral meanings in a wider context.

Social frames in general are related to the organization and structure of experience. On the one hand, they constitute a kind of cognitive pattern. On the other hand, they have a social reality since they shape the agents' expectations and guide their perception by providing a definition of the situation, a background for the interpretation of events and organizational assumptions. Social frames also enclose expectations with regard to moralities. Therefore, agents are not totally free in their decision to morally frame a situation since they always stand in a specific historical and cultural tradition. Which situations, events and problems may be framed in a moral way depends – at least partly – of the “general folk model of morality” (Johnson 1993: 15) that is valid in a given society. It defines “the way we understand our moral problems” (Johnson 1993: 15) and thus provides information about issues which may be framed morally: “That common moral tradition involves shared presuppositions about the nature of morality [...]. What counts for us as a moral *problem* is thus defined relative to such a tradition” (Johnson 1993: 14). Such a model does not necessarily have to be homogeneous, rather it can encompass competing “moral worldviews” (Lakoff 2016) which eventually inform “our very conception of what makes something a *moral issue*” (Johnson 1993: 14). Hence, one can assume that these social frames with their expectations regarding moral issues impact the interactants behaviour. In other words, the activities by which the interactants jointly bring about moral meanings are guided by specific expectations which eventually depend on their respective moral worldviews. Since doing ethics is closely connected with different moral worldviews, there is a need for studies of moral communication in different languages and cultures. Comparative studies are also most welcome. On an intra-linguistic level, they could unearth differences between speech communities with regard to ethical affordances available for the expression of moral meanings, for instance by analysing moral communication in different francophone communities. On a content level, a comparative study of different moral worldviews within one speech community could be promising.

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