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DOI:

[10.1016/j.langcom.2014.07.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2014.07.001)

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*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Bennett, J 2014, 'Avoiding emotivism: a sociolinguistic approach to moral talk', *Language & Communication*, vol. 39, pp. 73-82. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2014.07.001>

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Checked October 2015

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# UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

## Research at Birmingham

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# Avoiding emotivism: a sociolinguistic approach to moral talk

## 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 in this way – i.e. 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 focusing 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, potentially limiting if we wish to capture the possibility that (whatever we think of the logical possibilities) 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 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 they do demonstrate attempts to work on what moral talk is and what it can do, to articulate and deploy a particular metapragmatic conception of the function of moral talk. 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, and in more detail, that it 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 Finnegan 1989, Ochs and Schieffelin 1989, Besnier 1990, Hunston and Thompson 2000, Martin and White 2005, Engelbretson 2007), 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 metapragmatic one, an account of what people do and *can* do with language, and, since it might be seen as articulating arguments that are much more implicit in the functional linguistic approaches that I will move on to discuss, it is worth exploring at some length, with reference to perhaps its most explicit proponent, the early Twentieth Century British analytic philosopher A J Ayer.<sup>i</sup> To be clear, I do not discuss Ayer here as a direct influence on contemporary linguists but as someone whose work makes very explicit the much more culturally dispersed and implicit emotivist strain of thought, which crops up in a diverse range of fields (MacIntyre 1985, Gray 1998, Norman1998), including, I think contemporary functional linguistic dealings with evaluative language.

Ayer, in his *Language Truth and Logic* (1938) provides perhaps the classic statement of the emotivist view with his discussion of the meaning of the clause 'Stealing is wrong' (see Russell 1961 [1935] for a similar position, and Stevenson 1944, Hare 1952 for developments on this):

I produce a sentence which has no factual meaning – that is expresses no proposition which can be either true or false. It is as if I had written 'Stealing money!!' – where the shape and thickness of the exclamation marks show, by a suitable convention, that a special sort of moral disapproval is the feeling which is being expressed. It is clear that there is nothing said here which can be true or false.

1938: 142

In terms that later philosophers would use, moral judgements are not, for Ayer, 'truth-apt' – it makes no sense to ask questions of their truth or falsity. For a proposition to be truth-apt, Ayer needs it to be either internally verifiable, as in 'triangle have three corners' or verifiable with reference to the external world as in, 'Everest is the world's highest mountain' (see Putnam 2002 Ch1 for criticism on this point). For Ayer, moral judgements are neither of these things and, indeed, they do not even communicate any propositional content regarding their user's attitude or state of mind – they do not say 'I approve of this', or anything of the kind which might be verifiable with reference to their user's psychology. They are '*expressions ... of feeling*' (1938: 145, my emphasis), rather than propositions of any kind. Further, since nothing propositional is going on when people disagree on moral judgements, moral argument is not really genuine dispute at all. It is simply a clash of feeling; 'one really never does dispute about questions of value' (1938: 146).

Ayer's account is intended to be 'consistent with the conventions of our actual language' (1938: 139), in contrast to utilitarian and subjectivist accounts of moral judgements which, for Ayer, do not capture how people actually use morally evaluative language.<sup>ii</sup> But there is a certain selectiveness to Ayer's intuitive appeal to the norms of 'actual language', a selectiveness which goes beyond the fact that, as he half acknowledges (1938: 140), he clearly means a very specific actual social variety – i.e. the English of Cambridge philosophers and their associates in 1930s England. First, Ayer argues that in actual moral disputes we might debate the facts of the matter but that we leave evaluations alone on the grounds that they are unverifiable feelings, and thus that his emotivist view only articulates what we all implicitly know to be the case about 'actual language'. But others make the opposite point. 'It is precisely a mark of morality,' Bernard Williams writes, 'that *de gustibus non disputandum* [there's no disputing taste] is a maxim which does not apply to it' (1972: 17). And for Sayer, more recently, it is a feature of 'lay normativity', that is, everyday moral talk, that it proceeds as if it is about real properties of the world, and not simply personal expression – a resource for dealing with the real normative significance of the world out there (2005, 2006).

Further, Ayer's conception of moral judgements as expressions of feeling, and elsewhere as 'evincing' feeling, suggests an application of fairly specific kind of semiotic interpretation – that associated with the symptom, or, in Peircean terms, the *index* (1938). When we come across moral judgements, Ayer seems to suggest, we have to adopt indexical principles of interpretation, viewing the judgements that people make as 'evincing' their feelings, just, perhaps, as their sneezes 'evince' their colds or as their accents evince their social background. There seems to be no doubt that this is a *possible* way of responding to moral judgements – that we might often treat moral judgements in this way, or even that speakers might deploy moral judgements in order to allow us to infer something of what they feel (a possibility which will be explored in relation to political discourse below). But this does not mean that this is *the* meaning of moral judgements, that all other interpretations must drop away because we might understand moral evaluations as expressive symptoms. And neither does it preclude us from inferring feelings from non-evaluative statements.

Within the linguistic tradition, the emotivist distinction between *fact*-oriented description and *value*-oriented evaluation is prominently made by Ogden and Richards in *The Meaning of Meaning* (1949, first published 1923). For Ogden and Richards, when a word like 'good' is used to make a moral judgement, it 'stands for nothing whatever, and has no symbolic function ... expressing our attitude ... and perhaps evoking similar attitudes in other persons, or inciting them to actions of one kind or another' (1949: 125). Ogden and Richards were suspicious of such emotive meanings – in scientific writing in particular, they suggested, emotive meanings were 'subtle dangers [which] must be provided for' (1949: 124). If Ogden and Richards' view suggests a perspective on language which takes propositional meaning and reference as its right and proper function, and emotive meanings as some dangerous peripheral tendency, then this priority was fairly explicitly brought into question by linguistic thought later in the century (e.g. Jakobson 1960, Austin 1976). And work by functionally-oriented linguists in the past twenty to thirty years has built usefully on this questioning of the 'descriptive fallacy' as Austin calls it (Stubbs 1986, Ochs and Schieffelin 1989, Biber and Finnegan 1989, Hunston and Thompson 2000, Martin and White 2005, Engelbretson 2007). Such work on evaluative language (e.g. Hunston 2010) has revealed a great deal about the ways in which evaluative meanings pervade language use – what Bernard Williams would call the 'thickness' of language (1985). But it has also tended to assume a close relationship between the study of evaluative meanings and of subjective expression and intersubjective alignment, a connection explicitly stated in a number of recent works (Martin and White 2005, Engelbretson 2007, Jaffe 2009, Hunston 2010). It is this connection which is reminiscent of the emotivist position. The metapragmatic assumption which is critical here is that when we use language to evaluate we are *necessarily* expressing a subjective position, which is analytically distinct from propositional or representational meanings, and that to the extent that the function of any linguistic resource is to evaluate, morally or otherwise, it is also *only* to express or to align. If functional linguists are often criticised for positing apparently questionable

*form-function* relations (e.g. Chomsky 1976), then here we are dealing with problematic *function-function* relations.

Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (1978, Halliday and Matthiessen 2004) is influential in contemporary accounts of evaluative language. For Halliday, the influence of language function on language form applies to both specific instances of language use – so spoken or written texts shaped by their contexts of use – and to lexicogrammatical systems. At this systemic level, language is geared towards three metafunctions, the *ideational*, the *interpersonal* and the *textual* (Halliday 1978, Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). The ideational concerns the transformation of 'human experience ... into meaning' (2004: 29) and is the metafunction most closely related to representational or propositional meaning – it is language as a way of saying things about the world. The textual concerns the ways in which language is used to organise itself, the fact that one of the things that we use language to do is to create 'cohesion and continuity', to create coherent texts (2004: 30). And the interpersonal is about how we use language to express subjective stance and negotiate relations with others – 'we inform or question, give an order or make an offer, and express our appraisal of and attitude towards whoever we are addressing and what we are talking about' (2004: 29).

I do not suggest that Halliday himself takes any particular position on the function of moral talk, but it is the interpersonal metafunction to which evaluative meanings, of various kinds, are assigned in the functional tradition – they are a means of 'express[ing] our appraisal' (see Stubbs 1986, Hunston and Thompson 2000). This is made very clear in Martin and White's (2005) 'appraisal framework'. Evaluative language is, for Martin and White, to do with 'the subjective presence of writers/speakers in texts as they adopt stances towards both the material they present and those with whom they communicate' which includes 'the sharing of emotions, tastes and normative assessments' and 'is concerned with how writers/speakers construe for themselves particular authorial identities or personae' (2005: 1). As for Ayer, linguistic judgements of *right* and *wrong*, *should* and *should not*, *good* and *bad* are viewed as indicative or expressive of subjective presence. And rather than simply being a contingency of use, this interpersonal orientation is a systemic property of evaluation – that is where evaluation finds its place in the language system. This can be briefly illustrated with an analysis of Ayer's *Stealing is wrong* example, in what I believe is accordance with Martin and White's approach.

*Stealing is wrong* as a clause necessarily displays orientation to all three of Halliday's metafunctions. In terms of the *textual*, for example, 'Stealing' is presented as the Theme of the clause, suggesting that this is the 'starting point' of the message (c.f. 'What's wrong is stealing', which would position something being wrong as the starting point). In terms of the *ideational*, this is an instance of a Relational Process, whereby 'wrong' is construed as an attribute of 'stealing', broadly comparable to



clauses like 'Socrates is a man' or 'The sky is blue'. Of course, this means that the systemic functional analysis of 'Stealing is wrong' does allow it to have some broadly propositional meaning – 'wrong' is a property of stealing. But, and this is where the *interpersonal* comes in, to the extent that 'wrong' is evaluative, then it is also, to exactly that extent, interpersonal in function, a systemic expression of the speaker's stance and/or relations to others. The place that this interpersonal evaluative meaning would find in Martin and White's system is most likely as a *negative judgement* of *social sanction* and more specifically of *propriety*, to be systemically contrasted, for example, with 'Stealing is brave' which would be a *positive judgement* of *social esteem* and more specifically of *tenacity* (2005: 53). Martin and White assign evaluation to a distinct interpersonal meaning-making system, and in so doing they implicitly claim that – at the level of metafunction – it is possible to do what a metaethical philosopher might call 'disentangling thick ethical concepts' (see e.g. Williams 1985, Putnam 2002). The descriptive bits of 'wrong' and the evaluate bits find distinct places in the system, and have to be analysed as oriented towards distinct metafunctions – the broadly world-representational ideational and the (inter)subjective interpersonal respectively. This is broadly, and I should stress *implicitly*, an emotivist position in MacIntyre's terms.

It is worth noting that Martin and White go beyond the view of evaluation as subjective expression in further insisting that what is subjective is in fact *intersubjective*, a move argued for by a number of researchers in recent years (Du Bois 2007, Kockelman 2004, Karkainen 2006, White 2003). Evaluative language, for Martin and White, allows language users to 'align or disalign themselves with actual or potential respondents' (2005: 1). For White (2003), linguistic resources for expressing 'stance' are to be seen as resources of social alignment which allow language users to 'take a stance towards the various points-of view and value positions being referenced by the text and thereby align themselves vis-à-vis those who hold, or are represented as holding those positions' (2003: 260). Indeed, White presents this view as a response to those that 'assume that the sole function of these [evaluative] wordings is to reveal the speaker/writer's state of mind' (2003: 261), as a move away from a personalised conception of subjectivity to a social one. But this move from subjectivity to intersubjectivity remains problematic in much the same way as the accounts of individual subjective expression; why are evaluative meanings any more intersubjective than any others?

In summary, the approaches to evaluative language here might lead to an understanding of moral talk by which particular forms, or particular aspects of the meaning of such forms, i.e. the evaluative bits, would be understood as evaluative – this is a *form-function* relation – and then, in being understood as evaluative they would also be seen as interpersonally oriented – a *function-function* relation. This understanding perhaps relies on an implicitly emotivist conception of evaluative language. It is a metapragmatic stipulation which analysts bring to their investigation of evaluative language, rather than something which emerges from such investigation. What I want to now suggest is that the best

way to approach these problems is through the investigation of actually occurring moral talk, and, more specifically, that this investigation should proceed, not by searching for *the* forms or *the* functions of moral talk, but by looking at the ways in which language users negotiate indexical relations between language forms and their functions, that is, by paying attention to the relations between language use and metalevel negotiations of function – to the negotiation of moral talk as a register.

### 3. The negotiation of moral talk in a political speech

As a case study of localised metapragmatic negotiations of the register of moral talk this section presents a discussion of a political speech made in 2008 by Gordon Brown as Prime Minister and Leader of the UK Labour Party following the 2007/8 financial crisis – his 2008 Labour Party Conference Speech, given on the 23<sup>rd</sup> September.<sup>iii</sup> The intensity of morally evaluative language in the discourse of political leaders in this period has been widely commented on, implicated, for instance, by Jessop in the post-crisis semiotic ‘remoralisation’ of capitalism, a discursive shift with little to do with any material change (2013, see also Wintour 2011, Dean 2012, and on moral discourse as a crisis response more generally, Hunt 1999). By looking at the ways in which such morally evaluative language is used and negotiated in close detail, it might be possible to see attempts to negotiate the metapragmatics of moral talk as part of the broader political activity of crisis response. Moral talk – this remoralisation – seems to have been a useful resource in the political response to the crisis, and in Brown’s speech in particular, but how was it made to be so?

My argument will be first that Brown talks a great deal about *fairness* in this speech, and this is part of the move in political discourse after the crisis which the media and researchers have reflexively identified as a shift towards moralised discourse. Further, Brown engages in a great deal of metadiscursive commentary on his talk of fairness, which I see as an attempt to negotiate the higher order function of his moral talk in this speech, to anticipate, resist and encourage potential interpretations of what he is doing with all this talk of fairness. This attempt I think represents local metapragmatic work on the functional potential of moral talk (*function-function* relations) – Brown tries to make moral talk work for him as, specifically, an emotive or expressive resource.

First, Brown foregrounds evaluation in terms of ‘fairness’. ‘Fair’ and its derivations (‘fairly’, ‘fairness’, ‘unfair’, ‘unfairly’) are used 45 times in the speech. This was a point picked up on in media coverage of the speech, which tended to foreground, first, the personal nature of Brown’s speech and, second, the evaluative theme of fairness. A piece by *The Daily Telegraph*’s political editor, for example, also quantified his talk of fairness, identifying that ‘he used the words fairness and fair 40 times’ (Porter 2008). Instances include the following:

(1) I've always found it unfair that we cannot offer on the NHS the comprehensive services that private patients can afford to buy.

(2) So our policy is that everyone who can work, must work. That's why James Purnell has introduced reforms so that apart from genuine cases of illness, the dole is only for those looking for work or actively preparing for it. That's only fair to the people pulling their weight.

(3) And justice seen is justice done - so you will be seeing more neighbourhood policing on the street, hearing more about the verdicts of the court, able to see the people who offended doing community payback which will be what it says; hard work for the public benefit at the places and times the public can see it. That's only fair to the law abiding majority.

Brown tells his audience what is 'fair' and what is 'unfair' but he also performs a great deal of metalinguistic work on *fairness* itself. Some of this work is more specifically *metasemantic* (Silverstein 1993), acting roughly on the extension of the word:

(4) For me fairness is treating others how we would be treated ourselves. So it isn't levelling down but empowering people to aspire and reach ever higher.

(5) So across the board, we will create rules that reward those who play by them and punish those who don't. That's what fairness means to me

In this reflexive work on the semantics of fairness, Brown seems to be making room for traditionally conservative concerns with retributive justice and with economic aspiration, for example, under the traditionally left liberal concern with doing what is 'fair'. This is all very ideologically interesting, and all very 'New Labour' (Fairclough 2000), as is the tendency for uses of 'fair(ness)' to co-occur with forms which might be seen as indicators of subjectivity, for example, the first-person pronouns and *verba sentiendi* in 'I've always found it unfair', 'for me fairness is...' and 'that's what fairness means to me'. In such cases, Brown seems to mark his evaluation in terms of fairness as what Simpson would call 'positively shaded' (1993), as relating closely to indices of subjectivity or personal expression.

What is this talk of fairness there to do? We might be able to see how Brown conceives of it by looking at the metadiscourse he uses to indicate the aims of his speech. In, the following passage, from the very beginning of the speech (also excerpted in *The Guardian* and widely quoted in the media coverage), Brown articulates his general aims – he aims to say something about who he is:

(6) I want to talk to you today about who I am, what I believe, what I am determined to lead this party and this great country to achieve. As we gather here today I know people have real concerns about the future of our country, the future of the economy and people in this hall have concerns about the future of our party too. And so I want to answer your questions directly, to talk with you about how amidst all the present difficulties we should be more confident than ever that we can build what I want to talk to you about today. A new settlement for new times. A fair Britain for the new age. But let me start with something I hope you know already. I didn't come into politics to be a celebrity or thinking I'd always be popular. Perhaps that's just as well. No, 25 years ago I asked the people of Fife to send me to parliament to serve the country I love. And I didn't come to London because I wanted to join the establishment, but because I wanted and want to change it. So I'm not going to try to be something I'm not.

Brown signals a broadly expressive concern here – this speech is to be about what kind of a person he is, to make an appeal based prominently on *ethos*. This would seem congruent with his positively shaded judgements of 'fairness' discussed above. Later in his speech, Brown focuses his metadiscourse on his talk of 'fairness' in particular. He says:

(7) And why do we always strive for fairness? Not because it makes good soundbites. Not because it gives good photo opportunities. Not because it makes for good PR. No. We do it because fairness is in our DNA. It's who we are – and what we're for. It's why Labour exists. It's our first instinct, the soul of our party.

Brown here seems to be trying to tell his audience what it means that he talking of fairness at all, to guide their interpretations of his aims, his motivations – the higher-order functionality of *fairness* in his speech. That he talks about 'fairness', he tells us, is an index of his, and the Labour Party's, moral conviction, a matter of 'DNA ... instinct ... soul'. It is this metapragmatic work which is of particular interest, since it has to do with the functionality of moral talk in this instance. Brown's use of, and metadiscursive commentary on, moral talk – or more specifically his use of 'fairness'; it may be that other kinds of moral talk are worked on in other ways – is part of an attempt to communicate personal conviction, to take on the persona of the 'conviction politician' (Bewes 1997). Indeed the speech was broadly seen as an attempt by Brown to say something personal – it was introduced by his wife. Moral talk may have seemed like a useful way to go about this at a time when the parliamentary left (and the 'liberal' wing of US politics) were concerned with the supposed impersonality of their political discourse when compared to the apparently emotive moral tone of conservative politics, turning to the advice of academics turned communication advisors like George Lakoff (2002) and Drew Westen (2007). Brown in particular was fighting the conception, heavily emphasised in the media that he was

a dry and distant man, of little emotional substance and therefore not suited to political leadership. He had a problem with making an *ethos* appeal in the age of informalised political communication (Fairclough 2000, Pearce 2001). The indicators of subjectivity and the metadiscursive work that he does in the above extract are there to help achieve this, to stipulate or at least negotiate the function of moral talk in his speech, and, more specifically, to stipulate a particular kind of interpersonal orientation – not cynical PR-oriented persuasion, but personal expression. It is in Brown's interests to mark morality as an issue of expression, to use it as a resource for identity construction. But this does not mean that moral talk *necessarily* is interpersonal, emotive or expressive – rather the fact that Brown seems to try to work to make it so suggests that it might have various functions within a broad field, which language users might attempt to narrow or shift. Such negotiation may or may not succeed (it perhaps seems unlikely to have been very successful in Brown's case) and elsewhere it may not be as explicitly marked as in the speech discussed here (an issue to which I will return below). It is likely important in Brown's case that a broader 'emotivist' conception of the function of moral talk is available to those who design and listen to or read contemporary political communication – that the possibility of an emotivist interpretation is there to be capitalised on in using moral talk in an attempt to make this *ethos* appeal.

In terms of the overall argument of this paper, this analysis of Brown's speech is intended to indicate that language users – in this case a political leader – might attempt to locally negotiate the functions of their moral talk and in doing so perhaps work on broader conceptions of what moral talk in general is able to do. An objection might be that Brown's metadiscourse is necessarily functionally or pragmatically useless (which is a different thing to saying that it just might not work out for him on this occasion), and that his moral talk just is going to work as it is whatever he says about it. But this would seem to lead to a scepticism about the usefulness of metadiscourse across the board, as deployed in introductions to academic articles, dictionaries, best man's speech guides etc. If metadiscourse plays some normative metapragmatic role in these cases (see Silverstein 1993: 33 on the 'inherently "framing," or "regimenting," or "stipulative" character' of metapragmatics), then I would suggest that we should see it as at least potentially doing so in Brown's speech. Further it might be said in objection to this analysis that Brown's indexing of some subjective position or stance is inevitable in his moral evaluation, since it is an inevitable feature of language use more generally. This might be the case, but this position would not necessarily suggest that his moral talk has a particularly prominent role in this, and yet Brown seems to work to make it have such a role, to work to foreground the emotiveness of his morality, to articulate it as a marker of 'stance' (Kockelman 2004).

#### **4. Theoretical implications**

It is now possible to outline in theoretical terms how we might develop a model which avoids the kind of functional reification discussed in the first part of this paper and accounts for the (attempts at) functional negotiation discussed in the second. We might, I suggest, view moral talk as a *register* in the sense used by Agha (2003, 2007), as a relatively stable, but reflexively negotiated and negotiable set of forms (a ‘semiotic repertoire’ in Agha’s terms) which index a particular kind of activity – moral judgement. Moral judgement is not in itself a linguistic activity, but is something which can be, and very often is, indexed using linguistic resources (see Goodwin 2007 on the bodily communication of moral judgement, and Sayer 2005: 164-165 on moral judgements in Margaret Thatcher’s facial expressions). Negotiating this register is a matter of reflexive work on the *indexicality* of language at two ‘levels’ or ‘orders’ (Silverstein 2003). It has to do with what forms might index the activity of moral judgement – the semiotic repertoire – and with what activities the indexed activity of moral judgement might itself index, with *form-function* relations and with *function-function* relations respectively. Making indexical links at both of these levels requires a metapragmatics (on the part of the speaker, hearer, analyst), a sense of what bits of language do what (Verschueren 2000). This metapragmatics might be relatively implicit, formulating a link between, for instance, form and function which does not have to be spelled out, or it might be relatively explicitly articulated and negotiated, as is the case in the case discussed here, where Brown uses metadiscursive resources to say *this is a matter of personal expression*. (I have not attempted to discuss the metapragmatic negotiation of the repertoire itself here, but this would have to be part of a more comprehensive account of moral talk.)

Whether they be political leaders or anyone else, language users of course do not have complete freedom to decide what is and what is not moral talk or to determine exactly what they are doing with moral talk on a case by case basis – inherited registers come with an ‘indexical valence’ (Ochs 1996), a kind of field of functional-pragmatic indexical affordances, which can be worked on, but which is not the product of the immediate situation. Drawing on Raymond Williams, we might say that what are relevant here are ‘usable [indexical] signs’, ‘living evidence of a continuing social process, into which individuals are born and within which they are shaped, but to which they then also actively contribute, in a continuing process’ (1977: 37). The indexical valences of signs, their functional affordances in pointing to particular activities and identities, might be seen as both inherited and worked on, with different forms having different degrees of fixity. So, to return to the data discussed above, existing metapragmatic conceptions of moral talk of a broadly emotivist kind are drawn on and reinforced in Brown’s local negotiation of its function, perhaps at the expense of other conceptions of what moral talk could be doing here (e.g., if Brown has it his way, at the expense of a metapragmatic conception which see all moral talk as a form of ‘spin’).

This local negotiation is one achieved, or at least attempted, in metadiscourse, but a fuller account of the formation of moral talk or any other way of doing with language would need to go beyond this. How might we investigate the metapragmatic negotiation of moral talk, and other functionally oriented registers? Some approaches which might prove useful are outlined in Table 1 (and see also Agha 2007: 151).

[TABLE 1 HERE]

The final category in Table 1 is there to acknowledge that there are surely limits to the extent to which investigation of *explicit* metadiscourse practices can ever get at the full indexical potential of language. Not all of the ‘continuing social process’ of register work happens through explicit reflection and stipulation – perhaps very little of it does. For one thing, we would need to find meta-metadiscourse to guarantee the significance of the metadiscourse, and so on. Further, as is suggested in relation to Brown’s attempts at fixing the function of his moral talk, there is no guarantee of metapragmatic success – what a language user says they are doing with language might have little to do with what others take him or her to be doing. But the fact that there might be disagreement does not leave metapragmatics redundant. Far from it – such disagreement is only important *because* metapragmatics matter, because normative contest over what people are doing with language is central to its ‘social life’ (Cameron 1995, van Leeuwen 2004) and because the existence of metapragmatic conceptions of language function at some level are necessary for language to function at all (Silverstein 1993, Verschueren 2000). One way of maintaining this emphasis on the historical constitution of indexical valence through metapragmatics, while also being able to go beyond explicitly articulated metadiscourse might be to deploy a broad distinction between metapragmatic *discourse* and *doxa*, as outlined by Bourdieu (1977: 164-171, Bourdieu and Eagleton 1992 – see Silverstein 1993 on implicit and explicit metapragmatics). For Bourdieu, social life is subject to socially and historically formed practical classification systems – that is, ways of understanding the world which are also ways of acting in the world – at varying levels of explicitness. We might see enregisterment, of moral talk, and perhaps any other variety, as just such a form of classification, a metapragmatic classification of the things that it is possible for people to do with language. Bourdieu’s distinction then captures the fact that some of this classification takes place in ‘the universe of discourse’, while some of it is ‘doxic’, taken for granted, naturalised, implicit, but nonetheless socially contingent. The present work has called for further attention to be paid to explicit metapragmatic practices – ‘the universe of [meta]discourse’ –and to the relation between those practices and the assumptions of linguistic theory, but it does not suggest that attention should *only* be paid to metapragmatics where attempts are negotiation are at their most explicit. The formation of doxic metapragmatics – the existence of which is surely necessary for language to

function at all, but which still does not constitute a reifiable, ‘natural’ set of categories or form-function relations – is a phenomenon to which attention could usefully be paid.<sup>iv</sup>

Since this paper focuses on moral talk, it is worth finally reflecting on the significance of its arguments for the moral potential of moral talk. Emotivist tendencies leave moral talk with little moral significance – from their perspective, in talking of *right* and *wrong* or of ‘fairness’, all we can ever be doing is expressing ourselves or negotiating relations with others. This is also the perspective taken by the currently prominent social intuitionist approach to moral psychology. For Haidt (2001), for example, participants in moral discussion act like ‘lawyers’ rather than ‘judges’, drafting in moral talk to support positions already decided rather than to work towards decision. And, through such social intuitionist work, it is this emotivism which is advocated to the designers of political communication by writers such as Drew Westen (2007) and George Lakoff (2002), who present moral talk as a useful emotive resource, a resource for identity construction and emotional engagement with voters (see also Haidt and Graham 2007) – a useful resource for a politics conceived of as being a matter of self-presentation and interpersonal conflict, but a much less useful resource if we think that politics should have anything to do with deciding what is best to do in and about the world. Westen, for example, tells us that the success of US President Lyndon Johnson’s civil rights agenda derived from his discursive appeal to ‘moral emotions that transcended reason’ (2008: 49) and that such an approach should be emulated by contemporary Democrats. All of these approaches share a broad emotivist metapragmatics of moral talk as a value-expressive phenomenon, and therefore either an implicitly anti-realist view of morality itself, from which perspective morality is a projection of human point of view with no correlate in the world of facts ‘out there’, or a profound scepticism of the possibility that talking in moral terms can have anything to do with moral deliberation as an object-oriented phenomenon. If such a metapragmatics is not only reflexive but also to some extent constitutive, as might seem to be in the case of contemporary political communication, then this is perhaps likely to result in a sophist conception of moral concerns in political communication – *whatever* moral concerns we might find expressed there are to be understood as value-oriented, interpersonal, emotive, as telling us only about their speakers, but necessarily not about the world beyond them.

In contrast to this, viewing moral talk as a register subject to metapragmatic work allows at least for the possibility of a realist approach to morality. Moral talk can be seen as a cultural resource which at least potentially works as an attempt to address real moral difficulties – these difficulties would exist whether we could talk about them or not, but the value of moral talk lies in the fact that language is not purely personally expressive, that it might also be a collective effort to work with, about and on the world. The Marxian conception of language as ‘practical consciousness’ would seem to capture this well (Williams 1977). Moral talk might do all kinds of other things besides – express option,



persuade, align etc – depending on the ways it is enregistered. How we treat moral talk then, as in the practices of enregisterment in which we explicitly (*discourse*) and implicitly (*doxa*) engage, would seem to be enabling and constraining resources on the possibility of deploying the collective resources of language in attempts to grasp and deal with real problems of suffering and flourishing (Sayer 2006).

## 5. Conclusion

The argument made in this paper is that the properties of moral talk are not fixed, that they are negotiable, potentially both in the long term and the short, globally and locally, implicitly and explicitly, and in terms of form and function. As linguists, the investigation of moral talk – and perhaps language function more generally (Verschuere 2000) – might proceed not by reifying this register and ignoring reflexive practices, but by conceiving of them as central, by paying attention to the constitution of ways of doing things – including moral judgement – with language. The concepts used here – indexicality, metapragmatics and enregisterment – form a coherent conceptual grouping deployed in a number of recent meta-level focused accounts of social variation (Johnstone and Kiesling 2008). Bringing these to bear on this functional issue – moral talks – thus represents a contribution both (1) to the study of evaluative language and (2) to the study of metalevel linguistic practices. In terms of the first, they allow us to recognise the contingency, flexibility and reflexivity of language function, and to reconceive our object of analysis as necessarily *including* reflexive meta-level practices – we cannot just wade in, pick our favourite metapragmatics and give it functional priority; the metapragmatics is part of what is there to be understood (Cameron 1995, Agha 2007). In terms of the second, these concepts allow us to recognise the significance of reflexive, potentially ideological practices not just to what we can be with language, but what we can *do*. This is a matter of Hymes' (1966) secondary linguistic relativity – the negotiation of the kinds of things that language can do – a shaping of the capacity for human beings to act in the world.

This second point is especially important in the case of moral talk since the kinds of broad emotivist tendencies which MacIntyre (1985) identifies, and which I have considered in this paper, might easily seem to lend themselves to a morally cynical metapragmatics, a conception of moral talk as essentially amoral, to do with subjectivities, social norms, persuasion, without paying attention to the work that goes into making it these things, or that might go into making it otherwise, in for example Sayer's 'lay normativity' (2005, 2006). As linguists we contribute to the continuing social process of sign production, and should therefore be careful about what sides we take when we make functional stipulations. We might also beware that any analytic metapragmatics that we impose is part of the negotiation not only of meaning but of action, a means by which what human beings can and can not do is constrained, determined, contested.

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<sup>i</sup> Ayer's position might be more specifically identified as 'expressivism' by many commentators on metaethical philosophy, since he foregrounds the personally expressive rather than the conative-emotive dimension of moral judgement (though he is concerned with the latter too). My use of the terms 'emotivism' and 'emotivist' here follow MacIntyre, since he uses them to characterise a broad cultural orientation towards moral judgement, rather than to pinpoint a particular disciplinary position, and it is a similar broad tendency that I am discussing here. From MacIntyre's perspective, Nietzsche, Weber and Goffman, for example, are all emotivists, as is the typical modern bureaucratic manager – it is a broad tendency.

<sup>ii</sup> For example, someone who 'confessed that he sometimes approved of what was bad or wrong would not be contradicting himself' according to the norms of 'actual language'. But an account of moral judgements which supposed that to say something was bad was to report disapproval as a proposition equivalent to 'I disapprove of this' – what might be called a *subjectivist* account – would have to call this a contradiction. Ayer builds his emotivist approach on the basis of failures of other views on moral judgement in accounting for what he presents as the norms of actual language use (1938: 139).

<sup>iii</sup> At the time of writing (March 2014), the speech can be viewed and read at [http://www.labour.org.uk/gordon\\_brown\\_conference](http://www.labour.org.uk/gordon_brown_conference).

<sup>iv</sup> One way of seeing this point is as saying that it is always useful to pay attention to the motivations or formations of relations between materials and their semiotic uses (Kress 2010: 9-10), however stable and 'symbolic' they may seem. The alternative is a form of 'naturalisation', which perhaps is necessary to structural or systemic accounts of semiosis – see, for example, Levi-Strauss's claim that 'although it may be legitimate or even inevitable to fall back on a naturalistic [i.e. motivated] interpretation in order to understand the emergence of symbolic thinking, once the latter is given, the nature of the explanation must change as radically as the newly appeared phenomenon differs from those which have preceded and prepared it' (1972: 51).

**Table 1. Possible approaches to the investigation of the metapragmatics of functional varieties, including moral talk**

Language users' own metadiscourse	How do speakers use metadiscourse (Hyland 2005) to anticipate and negotiate the functions of their own discourse? (see Verschueren's 2000: 447)
Media metadiscourse	Where relevant, how do the media interpret and comment on others' discourse, through, for example, uses of speech reporting verbs (Caldas-Coulthard 1994) or interpretative commentary on language use (Schröter 2013)?
Audience metadiscourse	How do audiences, in focus groups or other forms of interview, talk about what others are trying to do with language? What is the 'folk linguistics' of language function (Niedzielski and Preston 2000)?
'Prescriptive' metadiscourse	How do guides to communication – e.g. Westen's <i>The Political Brain</i> (2007) or Luntz's <i>Words that Work</i> (2007) – suggest that language users should use particular forms or registers to achieve particular effects? In a sense, this question about formative normativity has to do with how such communication guides work as a form of 'verbal hygiene' (Cameron 1995).
Academic metadiscourse	How do academic accounts to capture what is going on when people use language draw on and posit implicit conceptions of language function?
Beyond metadiscourse...	How is metapragmatic work achieved in ways that are not explicitly metadiscursive, i.e. without explicit comment? In Bourdieu's terms (1977), how are <i>doxic</i> classifications of language function produced?