

Language Ethics: Foundations, Composition, Horizons

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The notion of “language ethics” as a distinct area of inquiry in theoretical and practical ethics, or at least its systematic exploration as such, is surprisingly recent (e.g. Peled 2018, Peled 2020). Drawing on key insights from philosophy, political science, linguistics, sociology and history (to name but a few), this intrinsically interdisciplinary notion can be broadly defined as a “set of values, norms and principles that govern our thinking on moral agency in the face of a reality of linguistic (as well as moral) difference” (Peled 2020: 11), which concerns the application of “philosophical methods to analyze the moral issues that pertain to language, such as those related, for example, to questions of linguistic freedoms, equality, autonomy, legitimacy, and dignity in multilingual societies” (Peled 2018: 144; see also Peled 2021).

Yet the notion of language ethics is more expansive than a bounded exploration of linguistic justice in political philosophy (e.g. Kymlicka and Patten 2003, Van Parijs 2011). It pertains, more broadly, to fundamental moral questions of selfhood, agency and authority in the face of linguistic diversity and alterity, as constitutive elements of the linguistic human experience. It examines, therefore, how the common human experience of linguistic difference impacts and reshapes the self-understanding of individuals and communities, aiming to identify the multiple uncertainties, ambiguities, anxieties and hopes that this experience raises, and to explore them in a systematic and principled manner.

The proposed paper presents this recently-developed notion of language ethics, and discusses its intellectual inception process, theoretical and practical orientations, and interdisciplinary scientific epistemology. Moreover, it contends that a theoretically-refined notion of language ethics, grounded in the moral, social and political philosophy of language and linguistic diversity, can further benefit from incorporating key insights from epistemology such as epistemic injustice (e.g. Fricker 2007) and cross-linguistic global epistemology (e.g. Stich, Mizumoto and McCready

2018), as well as from phenomenology (e.g. Taylor 2016, Ratcliffe unpublished; see also Sedivy 2021). In so doing, the paper proposes, the emerging notion of language ethics stands to benefit in important ways from a richer and more refined theoretical advancement, as well as contribute to the important bridging of the analytic-continental divide in contemporary philosophy in a distinctly productive and insightful manner.

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