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Morals and moralization

Linguistic approaches to a discourse-relevant phenomenon

This paper examines moralizing language acts, which we understand as discourse-strategic procedures in which the description of contentious issues and necessary actions is closely linked to moral terms. Words referring to moral values (like "freedom", "security" or "peace" but also negative concepts like "implausibility", "deceit" or "unfairness") are used to force through a demand which, consequently, appears to be inevitable and does not require any further explanation or justification.

This can be illustrated using the following sentence from a speech given by Erich Köhler in the German Federal Parliament on 30 September 1949 in which the demand to found a world organization is put on a secure moral footing with a positive reference to the high-value concept of 'peace' on the one hand and a negative reference to the generally spurned concept of 'violence' on the other:

> Let us found a world organization to establish power and peace in the world, to count Germany as the friend of nations, which will ensure resistance to violence.

Accordingly, the focus of our argument is the pragmalinguistically striking phenomenon of a specific rhetorical practice involving ultimate justification or inevitability, which we view and describe as a pragmeme. We understand a pragmeme to be a fixed pragmasyntactic coupling of a mode of expression, value attribution and situation type which is discourse-functionally determined.

In our paper we introduce various approaches to detecting and analysing the pragmeme of moralization in different genres. We are particularly interested in how such a pragmatic phenomenon can be identified on the surface level of texts from different sources (written and spoken).

We start off by outlining linguistic, corpus-linguistic and computer-linguistic modelling procedures, revealing parallels and differences between the various perspectives, approaches and epistemological interests.

Then we introduce the project "Annotation and analysis of moralizing practices in various domains of knowledge"[1] headed by Maria Becker at the Department of German, University of Heidelberg. This project involves creating a data set with texts in various languages (German, English, French and Italian) and from different genres (newspaper articles, online discussions, legal texts, non-fiction, etc.) which consists of excerpts with moralizing practices to be annotated with various (linguistic) categories like discourse actors, moral values and demands associated with moralizations, for example, all of which are characteristic of linguistic moralizing practices in the future. It should be possible to use the resulting data set to automatically investigate the phenomenon of moralization.

Our empirical analyses of practices of moralization in various genres and domains of knowledge combine both qualitative and quantitative methods to answer the following research questions:

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[1] https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/fakultaeten/neuphil/gs/sprache02/mitarbeiter/moralisierung.html (last accessed: 20.2.2023).

1) In which co-texts are issues "moralized", i.e. asserted as indisputable and inevitable due to their reference to values?

2) On the basis of which prototypical surface-level (linguistic-(con)textual) phenomena can this circumstance be detected?

3) Which corpus-pragmatic methods can be used to identify and then interpret such practices of moralization (as pragmatic categories within discourse analysis) in corpora?

This is the starting point for presenting two corpus-linguistic pilot studies on practices of moralization: the first pilot study covers political speeches in the German Federal Parliament and the second pilot study focuses on the verbal phrase "(An)Recht haben (dar)auf" (Have the right to sth), the moralizing potential of which we investigated in the German Reference Corpus (Deutschen Referenzkorpus, DeReKo), the Research and Teaching Corpus of Spoken German (Forschungs- und Lehrkorpus Gesprochenes Deutsch, FOLK) and online editions of daily newspapers as well as a database of sermons.

In these studies we distinguish between references to moral values without an absolute claim and moralization, defining the latter as a rhetorical strategy with the help of which the legitimacy of an attitude, behaviour or action is presented as being inevitable and inter-subjectively completely indisputable. In parliamentary debates, for example, there are, naturally, countless statements in which moral values are referred to and debated. We are only interested in statements, however, in which a political topic is asserted as being always valid because it appears to be firmly associated with a generally respected and universally accepted value.

In the pilot studies we identified the link between a (political) statement and an indisputably valid value, exploiting the co-texts, i.e. the words surrounding various vocabulary items relating to morals (pilot study 1) or the verbal phrase "(An)Recht haben (dar)auf" (Have the right to sth) (pilot study 2). We then used corpus examples to derive structural patterns of moralizing. The goal of our analyses is the linguistic operationalization of the concept of moralization in everyday language, which is extremely diffuse and blurred. Thus the operationalization was very challenging due to the high pluriformity and ambivalence of moralizing language acts.

Our first pilot study revealed that words relating to morals were used relatively frequently in the first year of the new German Federal Parliament in 1949. Starting in the 1950s they became increasingly rare until the trend reversed in the early 1960s. While the use of high-value words started to drop again in the 1980s and then remained constant from the 1990s or so onwards, the generally spurned negative concepts increased constantly. The quantitative analysis of moral words was followed by a qualitative categorization based on 900 sentences dating from 1949, 1983 and 2015. These sentences were annotated according to whether they illustrated moralization in our sense of the word or whether they just dealt with a moral topic. An analysis of the annotations showed, amongst others, that the proportion of moralizations in the three periods under observation decreased steadily. The instances annotated as moralizations then served as a basis for linguistic modelling as a pragmeme. The modelling involved inspecting the moralizing sentences identified to pinpoint the elements constitutive of moralization; in the next step, these sentences were annotated with this information.

In the second pilot study the multi-word unit "Recht (dar)auf" or "Anrecht (dar)auf" (the right to sth) was an extremely profitable indicator of or surface-level feature for detecting the phenomenon of moralization. A closer look at the most striking co-occurring partners clearly reveals the range and variability of its objects, ranging from general benefits ("compensation", "treatment", "benefit") via concrete actions and benefits ("premium reduction", "unemployment benefit", "pension") to demands related to public office ("seat", "seat on the federal council", "throne"). It was particularly interesting to see that inevitable values with the character of an ultimate justification like "support" and "protection" were also used as the object of the unit. The ensuing text analysis pointed out the similarities and differences between moralizing language acts in various domains (politics, religion), genres (mediation talks, panel discussions, interviews, sermons and forum discussions) and modalities (written vs. spoken). In view of the data we examined, we believe that another particularly interesting research perspective would be a more detailed investigation of when or rather in which contexts and under which conditions the demands associated with moralizing language acts and/or the values presented as inevitable were explicitly formulated with the character of an ultimate justification or remained implicit.

The outcome of our analyses is an abstraction of the results and a modelling of practices of moralization as 'pragmemes'. With our descriptive approach within (historical) socio- and discourse linguistics, we want to provide a tool with which to categorize and distinguish between different types of moral debate.

The corpus-pragmatic methods of annotation presented in our paper thus serve to dissect a data-driven, methodologically controllable linguistic working definition from the diffuse household concept of moralizing. *Moralizing* in everyday language (= ethical over-emphasis of values in comparison with ethically responsible pragmatism with contradictions between demands and reality) is more narrowly defined and operationalized here to reveal thematic constrictions and violations of the discourse principles of structural dialogicity.