**Morality, moral order, and language conflict and aggression**

**A position paper[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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**1. Introduction**

In this position paper, we examine a theoretical and a methodological question, which we regard as fundamental for positioning the Special Issue in language conflict and aggression, as well as in linguistic pragmatics:

1. How do morality and the moral order of things relate to conflict and aggression?
2. On which layers of language use can one capture morality and the moral order in instances of conflict and aggression?

Since the scope of our discussion is broad, in what follows we directly proceed with inquiring into these questions instead of following a more conventional chapter structure. However, before doing so, let us define ‘morality’ and ‘moral order’ which are our key terms of analysis.

* 1. *Key terms*

Both ‘morality’ and the ‘moral order’ have been studied in a bulk of research both in social sciences and humanities. In linguistic pragmatics, morals and morality have received significant attention (e.g. Gu 1990; Sell 1992; Terkourafi 2011; Culpeper 2011). Perhaps even more importantly, many pragmatic frameworks operate with an implicit sense of morality: Fraser and Nolen (1981) capture language use through the concept of interactional ‘contract’, Leech (1983) distinguishes ‘maxims’ of language use, and Watts (2003) uses the notion of ‘politic behaviour’ (see also Parvaresh and Tayebi 2018). These analytic constructs include a sense of morality in that their violation triggers moralisation. Unlike morality itself, the concept of moral order has not been on the research agenda in pragmatics until the 2010s, which witnessed a spur in research on this notion (see, e.g., Kádár and Haugh 2013; Haugh 2015; Spencer-Oatey and Kádár 2016; Kádár 2017).

Morality and moral order are closely related concepts, and in what follows we both define them and their relationship.

*Morality*

‘Being moral’ popularly implies the a) assumed and b) abstract ability to decide between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ (Boltanski and Thévenot 2000). What makes this seemingly simple decision so complex, subjective and debatable is the fact that an individual’s moral universe consists of an “interlocking sets of values, virtues, norms, practices, identities, institutions, technologies, and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate selfishness and make social life possible” (Haidt and Kesebir 2010, 800). A sense of moral responsibility which relates to moral decisions lurks in human interaction. Bergmann (1998, 284) defines this phenomenon as the ‘proto-moral’ aspect of social interaction. As he argues:

As competent actors we act on the assumption that we are capable of choosing among alternative courses of action. By invoking the principle of reciprocity of perspectives … we ascribe to others the same abilities and competencies that we claim for ourselves. Ascribing to others the capability of choosing among different courses of action means that we take them as fellow human beings who could have acted differently. This possibility of choice is the presupposition for the attribution of responsibility. Once the others are equipped with this capability of choice, they may be held responsible for their doings. Also, this is reciprocated; because the same principle will be extended to ourselves, others will hold us responsible for what we do. It is this reciprocal ascription of responsibility for behavior in the common world that must be seen as the elementary, proto-moral level of any dialogue.

Morality is a social skill: humans develop moral competence through socialisation (see a detailed overview in Kohlberg 2008; Bhatia 2010; and Santrock 2012). From a social interactional point of view, morality as an ability is *assumed* in two interrelated respects:

1. Any responsible member of a social unit is assumed to be moral (see Bergmann 1998 above; Miller 1994); and
2. In interpersonal and social conflicts (Vaske et al. 1995), the instinctive ‘gut feeling’ is that the other has been *immoral* (Haidt 2012), i.e. lacks the ability of making right decisions, or intentionally makes immoral decisions.[[2]](#footnote-2) That is, as soon as conflict emerges, what Bergmann (1998) defines as ‘proto-morality’ in social interaction ceases to be ‘proto’ because conflict triggers assumptive moral reflections (Hoffman 1979). In such moral reflections, interactants instinctively use moral agency (see Moulinou, this issue) to contrast themselves to others (Haidt 2012).

Morality is not only an assumed but also an *abstract* decision-making ability: it is anchored to (or, at least, projected to) moral norms and related social principles and ideologies, in the sense that when morality becomes salient in social interaction, interactants appeal to binding norms, principles and ideologies (see Section 2). In terms of metapragmatics, there is a variety of means to indicate moral appeals, spanning paralinguistic outbursts (Example 4), through interruptions (Example 3), to explicit moralisation (Example 1). Moral appeals may be ad hoc, but by default they follow metapragmatic/rhetorical schemata in a particular lingua-culture (White 2010).[[3]](#footnote-3)

In sum, on the level of social interactional behaviour, morality usually emerges as a *normative projection*, i.e. it contributes to framing interpersonal behaviour. Note that, in our discussion, morality and conflict are closely related as we approach moral feelings and subsequent (meta)argumentation as a result of conflict.

*The moral order*

As Horgan (2019, this issue) argues, the concept of ‘moral order’ has not been sufficiently defined in linguistic pragmatics, at least in the sense that relatively little research has been devoted to its relationship with morality. The ‘moral order of things’ refers to a cluster of aggregated rights and obligations (Wuthnow 1989; Douglas 1999) – and interactional schemata associated with these rights and obligations – which trigger *in actu* social interactional moves. The moral order is *morally-loaded* in that its violation triggers moralising reflections. In addition, the moral order is an *order* in the sense that both individuals and social groups expect the structure and style of interactions to unfold in what they perceive as an ‘orderly’ way. This sense of orderliness is not only present in ‘standard situations’ in which rights and obligations are important (see Kádár and House forthcoming), but also practically in any interpersonal setting, including those described as ‘familiar scenes’ in social interaction. This latter technical term was introduced by Garfinkel (1964, 225) who argues that:

familiar scenes of everyday activities, treated by members as the ‘natural facts of life’, are massive facts of the members’ daily existence both as a real world and as the product of activities in a real world. They furnish the ‘fix’, the ‘this is it’ to which the waking state returns one, and are the points of departure and return for every modification of the world of daily life that is achieved in play, dreaming, trance, theatre, scientific theorizing, or high ceremony.

The ‘orderliness’ of the moral order is not definite even in familiar scenes: for instance, language users may engage in metadebates as regards whether someone’s interactional behaviour correlates with what counts as contextually ‘appropriate’ (i.e. ‘appropriateness’ may be anchored to conflicting perceptions of the moral order). Yet, by default ‘ordinary’ interpersonal interaction follows *a* moral order.

The aggregated rights and obligations that moral order evokes are sacred and their violation triggers face-threat (Goffman 1981; see also Bergmann 1998): if a person is perceived to have upset the moral order, their moral trespass triggers moral reactions. The word ‘perception’ needs to be emphasised here: since the moral order is interactional, unless an interaction is scripted or takes place in ‘standard situations’ where rights and obligations are clear (Kádár and House forthcoming), responsibility for violating the moral order may be perceptual and subject to debates. Unlike internalised moral norms (see the above-discussed concept of moral competence), the moral order is not something individuals may ‘possess’ in a strict sense before engaging in an interaction. At the same time, the moral order is part of an individual’s social competence in that both individuals and groups of people have expectancies towards the orderliness of an interaction. That is, Bergmann’s (1998, 284) previously discussed notion of ‘proto-morality’ underlies any scene of ordinary interaction, including familiar scenes and standard situations. Engagement in social interaction continuously recreates the moral order (and the social structure that triggers the moral order; see Horgan 2019, this issue).

Conflict is a key phenomenon that interconnects morality and the moral order. It is usually conflict that creates what Bergmann (1998, 288) describes as ‘moral engagement’, which “is to a very high degree self-reflexive: … moralization over some issue easily leads to accusations and other forms of (counter-)moralization”. Conflict may emerge in – and stay within – the boundaries of familiar scenes and standard situations: say, in a workplace meeting staff members may have a disagreement but this conflict does not necessarily escalate in a clash and explicit moralisation. However, once conflict is significant enough to change the familiar dynamics of an interaction (example 2 below), or when it is conflict that triggers interactional engagement (example 1), language use leaves the realm of ‘orderly’ (Grimshaw 1990). While scenes of open conflict may be ‘familiar’ in the sense that people often know what’s coming, their dynamics differs from that of ‘orderly’ interaction. Such conflictive scenes are in the focus of this paper, and they are of interest to study morality and the moral order as they are normatively- and ideologically-loaded.

 Figure 1 summarises our social interactional definition of morality and the moral order:

Moralising reactions/gut feelings and related moralising judgements:

Individual as ‘owner’ of morality

Morality = assumed ability → Projected to norms, principles and ideologies

Conflict

Moral order comes into operation in interaction: Individual is responsible for the ‘order’

Centred on rights and obligations, the violation of which triggers gut feelings, conflict and moralisation

 f

salience

*Figure 1: The relationship between conflict, morality and the moral order*

Since the moral order is morally-loaded, morality is relevant to any interaction (Bergmann 1998), including familiar scenes. However, as Figure 1 illustrates, morality becomes salient in social interaction as conflict emerges and takes over the ordinary flow of events. Note that the model outlined here is unidirectional, as illustrated by the upward pointing arrows:

* There are conflicts that trigger strong moral reactions. Such reaction may manifest themselves in interactional engagement with a conflictive interactional and moral order that differs significantly from (or may even contradict with) the dynamics of the moral order in familiar/orderly scenes, as Example (1) below illustrates. Owing to this, such interactional events are salient to both their participants and observers.
* Violations of the interactional moral order, which are perceived negatively (e.g. a causing harm to others) may trigger conflict and subsequent moral evaluations, as Example (2) shows.
* However, reflective moral evaluations as they are understood in this paper need a conflict event to come into existence.

The figure also illustrates that scenes of conflict are unavoidably salient to participants and observers.

The following examples illustrate the general operation of Figure 1:

(1)

Scene: A cheated wife and her peer (a muscular man) break into the hotel room where the wife’s husband is found in bed with a woman.

W: wife (henceforth used as abbreviation for the same role)

H: husband

M: the man who accompanies the wife

E: the ‘extramarital partner’

1. W： 我就说这天下(.)没有不吃屎的狗，

2. 你们这两个不要脸的东西，给我起来，

3. (.) 看看什么骚包狐狸精？(.) 啊 : ？

4. 勾引别人老公 (.) 给我下来！(1.0) 给我下来！=

5. H： =你干嘛？(1.0) 干嘛呀？=

6. M： =有你事儿吗？有你事儿吗？有你事儿吗？

7. W： =把脸给我露出来！狐狸精！

8. H： (.) 你谁啊？=

9. M： =要脸吗？=

10. H： =你谁啊？=

11. M： =要脸吗？

12. W: 帮我把这被掀开。给你放到网上。

13. W：狐狸精，过来拍一下！

14. E: 别拍了。((哀求))

[…]

W goes directly to the bed and forces A down to the ground, while pulling off the duvet A is using to cover her face and body. The husband in bed is quickly trying to move away from the bed.

1.W: I told that (.) a dog can’t stop himself eating

2. shit. You two shameless things! Get up. (.)

3. Let us see how a Fox Spirit looks like. (.)Huh. : ？

4. Seducing someone’s husband.(.) Get down! (1.0) Down! =

5. H: =What d’you wanna do? (1.0) What d’you wanna do?

6. M: =Is it your business? Is it your business? Is it your business?

7. W: Show me the face! Fox spirit!

While calling A “bitch”, W slaps her face violently.

8. H: (.) Who are you? =

9. M: =Want [reserve] your face? =

10. H: =Who are you? =

W uses her mobile phone to start video recording A’s naked body

11. M: =Want [reserve] your face?

12. W: Help me to take it off. Put you online.

13. W: Fox spirit. Come and let yourself be filmed.

W is pulling A by her hair to face a bigger camera held by M, while A is desperately trying to lower her head and using her hands to cover her face.

14. E: Please don’t. ((whimpering))

[…]

(Cited from Ning and Kádár)

(2)

On 9 August [2013], AOL chief executive Tim Armstrong … fired one of his managers in front of about 1,000 employees on a company-wide conference call – ironically the call was about impending layoffs at local news network Patch.com.

‘Abel, put the camera down. You’re fired. Out’, said Armstrong in the leaked audio of the chat, dismissing Patch creative director, Abel Lenz, for pulling out a camera during the meeting. After an awkward five-second silence, Armstrong continued his meeting; he reportedly referenced the firing again five minutes later, when he explained that he saw the company as a ‘sports team’s locker room’, and that he didn’t want anyone ‘giving the game plan away’.

(cited from Kádár 2017, 126)

Example (1) is drawn from a corpus of Chinese ritual public communal humiliation (see Ning and Kádár forthcoming) which consists of incidents where couples who have been caught in extramarital sex are humiliated in front of the public while being video-recorded (the videos, in turn, are uploaded to social media). Such practices are triggered by a morally-loaded conflict, and their rhetoric reflects this moral conflict: e.g. the wife in (1) repeatedly refers to the violation of her family’s harmony, and the face-loss that she suffered, i.e. the interaction represents a moralising reaction to a moral trespass (conflict→moralising reactions in Figure 1). Note that moralisation does not entail actual moral upper hand: for instance, in Chinese society many feel that such scenes of aggression are coercive and backward in spite of their relative popularity as a form folk-punishment in online media. Punitive practices such as (1) trigger a situated (and contradictory) moral order (conflict→moral reactions→moral order in Figure 1): as Ning and Kádár (forthcoming) point out, rites of public communal humiliation are both violent and ‘orderly’ at the same time, i.e. even though the interactants exchange blows, scream and cry, in terms of language use they follow a sense of interactional order, in that the interactions in the corpus unfold along similar moves which are realised by similar rhetorical strategies. For instance, in the corpus of Ning and Kádár both the cheated spouse and the humiliated person talk like the participants in a trial: the spouse often uses morally based derogatory expressions such as ‘fox spirit’ above instead of swearwords, physical damage is symbolic rather than real, and the ‘adulterous’ person talks defensively. In terms of rhetoric, such interactions are centred on moral ideologies such as chastity (see Meng 2003).

The second example features an ad hoc ratherthan ritual act of dismissal, even though it bears many features of a formal rite of dismissal, in that it is a) morally-loaded (‘put the camera down’ indicates that the utterer knows that the other is secretly filming and broadcasting the event), b) it is made by the ratified representative of a social unit, and c) it changes interpersonal relationships dramatically. In terms of our model, what we can observe here is that Abel Lenz saliently violates the moral order of the interaction by making a secret move that trespasses his obligation of keeping the conversation private (moral order→conflict). There are various ways in which the interactional order could be trespassed without triggering the escalation of conflict: Lenz might have interrupted the chief executive Tim Armstrong on various occasions, might have been unresponsive, etc., and such trespasses might have triggered negative responses. However, by televising a private meeting he saliently trespasses an obligation that is fundamental in his role at the company, and this triggers a gut reaction: Armstrong abruptly orders Lenz to leave the room. The silence that follows this dismissal triggers metareflection on the conflict: Armstrong narrates his decision through a moral lens (moral order→conflict→morality). By positioning Lenz as a person who gives ‘the game plan away’, Armstrong morally rationalises his decision as a ‘just’ dismissal of a person who committed an immoral act.

 Importantly, we agree with Horgan’s argument (2019, this issue) that the relationship between morality and moral order should not be studied merely in the context of moral outbursts like the ones we have examined as examples in this section. Indeed, morality and the moral order are part e.g. of ‘everyday incivilities’ (see Horgan 2019, this issue), which are significantly less dramatic than the examples studied here (and some other papers in the Special Issue, such as Moulinou 2019; Parvaresh 2019, both in this issue).

 The present section has overviewed the key concepts of morality and the moral order and has examined their relationship with conflict by proposing a model. In the following section we will elaborate this model.

1. **Language aggression, morality and the moral order**

So far, the discussion has focused on conflict. Yet, as research such as Bou-Franch and Garcés Conejos-Blitvich (2014) demonstrates, while conflict and aggression are very closely related they are not necessarily the same, and in our view, they should also be distinguished in research on morality and the moral order. For instance, in political discourses (see Bull 2019, in this issue) moral conflict may be real, but aggression remains symbolic and ritually ‘disarmed’ (Bull 2019) and may only become salient in such scenarios if a political actor trespasses their institutionalised rights, e.g. if (s)he physically attacks another politician, grabs a sacred object such as the ceremonial ‘mace’ in British Parliament, and so on and so forth. Of course, institutionalised interaction such as parliamentary debates represents a specifically ‘regulated’ domain of daily interactions, and in other encounters aggression may be a concomitant of conflict as Example (1) illustrated. In what follows, we will overview the role of aggression in the social interactional operation of morality and the moral order.

 In terms of morality, aggression in itself may be a condemnable act (but see Rai and Fiske 2011): as Bandura (1978) points out, the avoidance of aggression is an integral part of the process of socialisation. Since morality may be understood an ‘ability’ (Section 1), as far as aggressive behaviour is perceived as unjustified it tends to be morally sanctioned. This sanctioning spans cases of everyday incivilities (Horgan 2019, this issue) to morally condemned forms of ‘antisocial’ aggression[[4]](#footnote-4) (the latter may represent a lack of socio-cognitive development; see Kohlberg 1963; Sutton et al. 1999). Yet, aggression is not necessarily antisocial and immoral: as Kádár (2017) has argued (see also Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2009), aggression is often perceived as a communally ‘restorative’ form of behaviour. A prime example for this is (1) (in spite of its controversial and coercive nature) where aggression is a part of the moral order of the interaction and the aggressors ideologically position their own behaviour as moral. Such interactions represent what sociologists describe under the umbrella of ‘moral aggression’:

The term moral aggression has been used to refer to the intense negative reactions individuals sometimes experience when they have been treated in an unjust, unfair, or untrustworthy fashion … The notion of moral aggression reflects a basic intuition about the phenomenology of injustice: People often have very limited tolerance for other people or groups who are perceived to be dishonest or untrustworthy, especially when they believe that they themselves or the group to which they belong are engaging in more cooperative, trustworthy behaviour. (Kramer and Messick 1998, 248)

Note that the ‘restorative’ function of moral aggression is ambiguous in the sense that ultimately the restoration of the moral ‘equilibrium’ is only a moral *motivation* for individuals who may often morally veil their intent of simply abusing someone (Archer 2002; Haugh 2018). Along with ‘restorative’ cases, aggression may be justifiable, and manifest itself in the moral order of interactions in a variety of behaviour types, such as cases in which aggression is the raison d’être of a social encounter, as in sports events (see Example 5), reality shows in which aggression serves as entertainment (Culpeper 2005), and so on and so forth.

In sum, aggression has a complex relationship with both morality and the moral order. It may be morally sanctioned and disruptive to the moral order of an interaction, but this is only the default situation. As a basic psychological attitude, humans tend to *rationalise* their and others’ aggression (Lagerspitz and Westman 1980; Tsang 2002), even though the aggressor may not need to justify his or her actions. Some actions and practices are more rationalisable than others: e.g. aggressively intervening in a scene of public abuse is more justifiable than committing the abuse. The more justifiable a type of aggression is, the more likely it will imbue the moral order of an interaction (see the conflict→morality→moral order chain in Figure 1, and the analysis of Example 1). Thus, aggression may be perceived on a scale with ‘morally condemned’ and ‘justifiable’ on its ends:

social ratification

justifiable aggression

morally condemned

*Figure 2: Social ratification and the ‘morality’ of aggression*

From the aggressor’s perspective his or her own behaviour may be moral or at least justifiable.[[5]](#footnote-5) What distinguishes morally condemned and justified aggression as discursive constructs is that the latter enjoys a stronger degree of communal support, or – in the case of dyadic interactional setting – a stronger sense of justifiability in the eyes of others (see a discussion on this concept in Tracy 2008 as ‘reasonable hostility). The justifiability of an instance of aggression correlates with its interrelation principles and ideologies, i.e. whether there are social principles or ideologies that make it ‘rational’. Since there are settings in which aggressive behaviour upholds or regulates interpersonal relationships, spanning from military training (Bousfield 2010), through in-group ‘bullying’ (Kádár 2013), to sports events (Sacks et al. 2003), there are moral norms, principles or ideologies that call for the deployment of aggression in such settings. In other scenes there may be a clash between the moral background of aggression and social moral norms, principles and ideologies: e.g. punishing ‘uncool’ students in a class via bullying may be ‘locally’ endorsed in a social grouping this practice is likely to contradict with public morals (Kádár 2013).

The role of aggression in social interaction (and related moral order) is one of the most fundamental phenomena in social life, as ethological research demonstrates. In his authoritative work on language aggression and evolution, Allman (1995, 152) notes the following:

One of the key roles that aggression plays in a society is, ironically, to keep the peace. Aggression helps maintain the complex pecking order that typically characterizes primate groups. In rhesus monkeys, for instance, both males and females have their own separate ‘dominance hierarchy,’ with most individuals being both directly above or below someone else on the ladder. While being a dominant doesn’t necessarily guarantee exclusive rights to food or mates, such hierarchies typically dictate who among a group will have a first access to essential resources. With such hierarchies, the question of who goes first is settled beforehand, which helps to keep day-to-day aggression among individuals to a minimum. Studies show that encounters in which a monkey peacefully defers to a more dominant monkey occur three times more likely than incidents involving overt aggression between the two.

We agree with Allman that aggression is a phenomenon through which societies organise their internal social interactional orders. If we take Allman’s thoughts further, it is clear that even in primate societies there is a sense of moral order which manifests itself in rights and obligations, exactly owing to the presence of aggression as a social regulatory phenomenon:

1. By default, a rhesus monkey lives his or her life with the rights and obligations of one’s place in the hierarchy; e.g. (s)he is obliged to pass on access to food to a stronger member of the community, but the same member can rightly expect this stronger member to offer protection in certain settings and refrain from unprovoked attacks.
2. If a monkey intends to trespass her or his rights and obligations, or if (s)he reacts to such a trespass (which unavoidably comes at one’s cost), (s)he is expected to act aggressively or accept the status change.
3. Such acts of aggression need to be kept to a minimum, to maintain the cohesion of the community.

It would be ambitious to argue that this social interactional order of things is entirely similar to the concept of moral order in the technical sense of the phrase, since the moral feelings of primates are different from those of humans (Piaget 1950), and also primates are not able to interlink their behaviour with abstract moral norms, principles and ideologies (Figure 1). At the same time, it is certain that even the interactional order of rhesus monkeys (and other communal primates) dictates a sense of ‘appropriate’ behaviour in their community, and a joint perception of when aggression is acceptable or expectable. As Allman (1995, 152) also points out, “dominant males rarely use the full power of their strength and their large, sharp canine teeth to deter challenges by others, depending instead on threatening displays to make their point”. Thus, even in well-organised primate societies, there is certainly a common perception of how social interaction should unfold, and within this common perception aggression fulfils a complex role: on the one hand it creates a communal moral order, while on the other hand it keeps conflict to a minimum. Importantly, as ethologists such as Flack and Waal (2000) point out, successful groups of primates develop more complex moral feelings than others, i.e. the more complex the moral order of a social grouping is the more successful it is likely to become.

 Compared to the animal kingdom, in human societies the relationship between aggression and moral order is complex. Since language empowers humans to reflect on the moral order of things through moral appeals, unlike primates and other animals humans can do complex things with language:

1. *Humans can morally reinterpret aggression:* As we have argued in Section 1, moral psychologists such as Haidt (2012) have demonstrated that humans practically always morally veil their own aggression. Such moralisation becomes particularly active when someone’s aggressive behaviour is morally condemned (Figure 2), or at least morally dubious (e.g. Schie and Wiegman 2006). For instance, in instances of school bullying members of groups who abuse a victim often claim that they were ‘just kidding’, and ultimately it is the victim who “doesn’t understand” humour (Kádár 2013).
2. *Humans can engage in metadebates on aggression:* Due to cultural and social variation between how groups of people may perceive moral norms, humans also engage in debates as regards whether aggression in a particular interaction is moral or not. As Matsumoto (1996, 18) argues, “[w]hile the norms of any culture should be relevant to all the people within that culture, it is also true that those norms will be relevant in different degrees for different people.” Consequently, people may not necessarily perceive aggressive behaviour uniformly, or even interpret aggression as the violation of the same social norm. One may find many examples for such debates, and as an example we refer to debates on whether military training should operate with offensive language: with increasing awareness of the detrimental effects of rudeness in military training on the trainees (Baratta 2014) public debates have kicked off as regards whether such rudeness is necessary.
3. *Humans can ethicalise aggression:* Due to the power of language to create abstract beliefs, humans are also capable of ethicalising aggression as part of the moral order of interactional practices that are communally endorsed and regulated by norms, principles and rules, e.g. when it comes to ritual forms of aggression in sports (see Section 3). In many sports such as martial arts, being aggressive is not only part of the moral order of things but is also encouraged by codes of conduct – e.g. in judo, not being sufficiently aggressive triggers penalty.

In the present section, we have overviewed the role of aggression in the relationship between morality, the moral order and conflict. In light of the aforementioned arguments, we should revise Figure 1 as follows:

conflict and morally condemned aggression

 c

Moralising reactions/gut feelings and related moralising judgements:

Individual as ‘owner’ of morality

Morality = assumed ability → Projected to norms, principles and ideologies

conflict and justified aggression

 c

Moral order comes into operation in interaction: Individual is responsible for the ‘order’

Centred on rights and obligations, the violation of which triggers gut feelings, conflict and moralisation

salience

Reinterpreting, meta-debating, and ethicalising aggression

*Figure 3: The relationship between morality, the moral order, conflict and aggression*

This modified version of the figure features both ‘justified’ and ‘morally condemned’ aggression. The gradient arrow pointing out from morally condemned forms of aggression indicates that such forms of aggression may be difficult to rationalise. The two-headed arrow between justified and morally condemned aggression illustrates that these forms of aggression are not absolute categories, but rather the two ends of a scale (Figure 2). Yet, as we have previously pointed out, it is not necessarily the case that justification plays a role in the operation of aggression since an aggressive person may simply not need to justify their aggression, even though psychological research (e.g. Haidt 2012) has revealed that people tend to morally justify their actions (although what counts as ‘moral’ is of course not universally agreed upon and is embedded in relationships and practices). The upward-pointing curved arrow on the left of the figure indicates that the relationship between morality and the moral order is more complex than Figure 1 suggested: as we have argued in this section, language users may reinterpret, debate and ethicalise aggression.

**3. Approaches to examining morality and moral order**

In scenes of language conflict and aggression, morality and the moral order can be captured by focusing on different layers of language use:

* *Ethnomethodological approach:* Conflict and aggression may emerge in familiar scenes when the moral order of an interaction is trespassed. The ethnomethodological approach offers a framework to examine situations in which the interactional context may be relevant but the focal point of the analysis is the interaction, due to familiar nature of the latter.
* *Discourse-based approaches to conflict, morality and related issues:* Many scenarios of conflict and aggression may not fit into the category of ‘familiar scenes’ in the ethnomethodological sense. In particular, when conflict and aggression prevail in an interaction, the interaction fails to represent the realm of ‘familiar’ any longer (see above). Analysing context, relational histories, the sociocultural norms, principles and ideologies that fuel the conflict, and other broader (in a sense, extra-interactional) factors are important to understanding the dynamics of such incidents and they call for a discourse-based approach to conflict, morality and related issues.
* *Interactional ritual approaches:* As Goffman (1959; 1963) has pointed out in a most convincing way, rituals are highly important in modern lives because a) they are means of ‘the social reproduction of moral order’ (Horgan 2019, this issue), and also b) they uphold the ‘moral identity’ (Bergmann 1998, 285) of social units. In the realm of language conflict and aggression, there are ritual practices that are aggressive by nature (Kádár 2017) and which play a key role in various domains of social life. Such rites of aggression span the above-discussed case of military trainings, through martial arts classes (example 5), to scenes of ritualistic punishment (example 1). Since moral principles and ideologies play a key in conventionalising aggression in a ritual practice, the study of rites of aggressions makes these abstract moral norms, principles and ideologies its analytic foci.

In linguistic pragmatics, the concept of ‘moral order’ has been initially approached by following Harold Garfinkel’s (1964; 1967) interpretation of routinised activities in familiar scenes (see an overview in Haugh 2015). Garfinkel was interested in moral order as a phenomenon that underlies ordinary interaction in a seen but unnoticed way. He conducted a series of what he called ‘breaching experiments’: he generated cases in which a participant in familiar scene (a person who agreed to help if his experiment) behaves in an ‘unorderly’ fashion, and observed the reaction of other participants. The experiments revealed that such ‘unorderly’ behaviour triggers strong reaction, which in turn demonstrates that routinised familiar scenes operate with a strict moral order. From the point of view of conflict and aggression, Garfinkel’s experiments are highly relevant since the violation of the moral order generates conflict and aggressive reactions, as the following example illustrates:

(3)

On Friday my husband and I were watching television. My husband remarked that he was tired. I asked, “How are you tired? Physically, mentally, or just bored?

(S) I don’t know, I guess physically, mainly.

(E) You mean that your muscles ache, or your bones?

(S) I guess so. Don’t be so technical.

 (after more watching)

(S) All these old movies have the same kind of old iron bedstead in them.

(E) What do you mean? Do you mean all old movies, or some of them, or

just the ones you have seen?

(S) What’s the matter with you? You know what I mean?

(E) I wish you would be more specific.

(S) You know what I mean! Drop dead!

(Cited from Garfinkel 1964, 230)

What causes the conflict in this interaction is that the wife violates the routine expectations of the conversation between intimates by asking for clarification of interactional meanings that she is supposed to know. As the interaction unfolds, the husband becomes more and more irritated, and ultimately bursts out, uttering ‘Drop dead’.

The ethnomethodological approach may be relevant for understanding moral order (and the moral norms, principles and ideologies related to this order) not only in narrower-sense familiar scenes, but also in standard situations that are morally-loaded such as complaints (Drew 1998). However, from the point of view of language conflict and aggression – provided that one does not attempt to go beyond the ethnomethodological focus on routinised/everyday activities – this view is limited. As Bergmann (1998, 285–286) points out, ethnomethodology neither pursues interest in detailed contextual factors (e,g, the sociocultural setting), nor in Goffman’s “face and moral identity”.[[6]](#footnote-6) Because of this, this approach may only help us to study a limited set of scenes of conflict and aggression, as Figure 4 illustrates:

conflict and morally condemned aggression

 c

**Moralising reactions/gut feelings and related moralising judgements:**

**Individual as ‘owner’ of morality**

Morality = assumed ability → Projected to norms, principles and ideologies

 f

**conflict and justified aggression**

 cn

**Moral order comes into operation in interaction: Individual is responsible for the ‘order’**

**Centred on rights and obligations**, the violation of which triggers gut feelings, conflict and moralisation

 c

salience

Reinterpreting, meta-debating, and ethicalising aggression

*Figure 4: The ethnomethodological approach to the study of moral order and language conflict and aggression*

As figure 4 illustrates, the ethnomethodological approach has an interactional focus and context is secondary to interaction. Thus, conflict (and subsequent aggression and moral evaluations/gut feelings) in this model may emerge as a ‘consequence’ of interactional violations of the moral order as Example (3) illustrates. Those parts of the figure that occur in grey are relatively irrelevant to the ethnomethodological approach.

 In many scenes of daily life, interaction unfolds in the context of a conflict. For instance, Horgan’s (2019, this issue) study on ‘everyday incivilities’ in public urban spaces features such a case: when it comes to instances such as people having an argument as someone’s cutting lines, the interaction fails to represent the realm of ‘familiar’ and routinised . For instance, Horgan (2019, this issue) provides the following example:

A young white woman recounts sitting behind a middle aged white man on a bus: I put on scented hand sanitizer … and he turns around and says ‘Who the “f” wears that much perfume’ and looks at me and says ‘that’s disgusting, little whore, you shouldn’t be wearing that much perfume’.

The interaction unfolds here as a case of conflict and unjustified aggression takes place. Urban public spaces are dominated by the norm of ‘civil inattention’ (Braverman 2009, 55), i.e. people in crowded spaces such as buses are supposed to avoid devoting too much attention to each other e.g. by staring on someone. The man in the example trespasses this norm and generates a conflict as he turns around and makes a rude remark. Such incidents may not fit into the ethnomethodological analytic scope due to the focus of the latter approach on routines: since interactions generated by conflict and aggression are unavoidably salient and emotionally involving, they simply cannot be routinous by nature (note that this sense of salience is due to human awareness of danger that resides in aggression; cf. Lorenz 2002).

Using conflict and aggression as a focal point of analysis provides a useful tool to understand a set of phenomena, spanning the above case of incivilities, through bystander intervention (Kádár 2017), to discursive incidents where interactions that start as ordinary conversations go amiss. What binds such approaches together is a joint focus on conflict and aggression as starting points of an interaction, rather than conflict and aggression as a product of conversation. To illustrate this point, let us refer to a case in which the first author was involved:

(4)

1. Academic: So what languages are you working at?

2. DK: Erm, English, Chinese and Japanese, kind of. So how about you?

3. Academic: Hah! ((snorts)) I am one of the four scholars in the world who speak a whole language family! I have learnt *fourteen* different languages!

4. DK: Wooow, that’s great.

5. Academic: ((turns away from DK))

((roughly 5 minutes pass in silence and the taxi arrives at the hotel))

6. Academic: ((getting out))

7. DK: Good luck with your keynote tomorrow!

8. Academic: I don’t need any luck! ((slams the door))

This incident took place when two male researchers, a younger and significantly less accomplished (DK in the excerpt) and an elderly one (referred to as ‘Academic’ for ethical reasons) shared a taxi. Already before the interaction took place, DK found Academic’s style intimidating but shied away from engaging in a conflict, i.e. the seeds of conflict had been planted prior to the clash. The setting of the interaction did not help: Academic and DK were the two keynotes of an academic conference and as such there was a certain sense of pressure on them to interact, in particular in the confined space of the taxi. When Academic inquired about DK’s target languages as a linguist, DK felt intimidated by the tone in which the question was asked, but a) attempted to deliver a response that he perceived as appropriate by intentionally downgrading the fact that he is a polyglot, and b) to showcase interest by asking back. As per the routinised order of such casual conversation (or, at least, as DK perceived this order), Academic was expected to respond in an equally casual manner by being modest about his academic achievements. This, however, is not what happened: in response (line 3), Academic provided a very explicit response regarding his language skills. Note that he delivered this utterance after a snort, which may indicate an outburst of his gut feelings (Haidt 2012) caused by his frustration with DK not being sufficiently familiar with his status as a renowned expert of a language family (and, indeed, asking such a question to, say, Noam Chomsky may be potentially rude). In response (line 4), DK uttered a sarcastically overstressed ‘wooow’ which was an aggressive manifestation of his frustration. Whilst both DK and Academic took offence as the interaction failed to unfold as they would have expected, it is clear that example (4) does not simply feature a simple violation of a routine but rather it is embedded in an interpersonal tension, i.e. it is a form of conflict talk.

 In sum, discourse-based approaches to conflict and related moral issues have a different focus from ethnomethodology. While the conflict between ‘Academic’ and DK came into existence in interaction, its roots are extra-interactional, and the routisined moral order becomes relevant only as we attempt to rationalise the offended behaviour of participants in lines 3 and 4. Figure 5 summarises the scope of discourse-based approaches to conflict and related moral issues:

conflict and morally condemned aggression

 c

Moralising reactions/gut feelings and related moralising judgements:

Individual as ‘owner’ of morality

Morality = assumed ability → Projected to norms, principles and ideologies

conflict and justified aggression

 c

Moral order comes into operation in interaction: Individual is responsible for the ‘order’

Centred on rights and obligations, the violation of which triggers gut feelings, conflict and moralisation

salience

Reinterpreting, meta-debating, and ethicalising aggression

*Figure 5: Discourse-based approaches to conflict and related moral issues*

 As a final methodology in the present discussion, the phenomena of conflict and aggression may be approached through the lens of interactional ritual theory (Kádár 2017). ‘Ritual’ was brought to urban social theory by Goffman’s (1963) seminal work, which uses ritual as a broad analytic concept to capture the ‘sacredness’ of self aka ‘face’ in modern urban lives: ritual encompasses practices that are centred on rights and obligations and through which face in maintained. Thus, it is ritual interactional practices through which the interpersonal and social order is being reproduced and maintained in a social unit (Wuthnow 1989); since this reproduction process is a key aspect of social life, rituals are loaded with the norms and ideologies of the social unit that deploys them (Collins 2004). Ritual is a broad category in that some rituals such as rites of public communal humiliation (see Example 1 above) are more salient/less conventionalised than others, e.g. practices through which we indicate that we participate in a standard situation (Kádár and House forthcoming). What interconnects all ritual practices, however, is that all rituals uphold and reproduce the moral order (Kádár 2017).

 It is difficult to prescribe *a* ritual approach to morality and moral order in the context of language conflict and aggression, and as Horgan (2019, this issue) convincingly demonstrates, ritual as a routinised/conventionalised form of social life may be part of analyses which focus on violations of ritual practices and in which ritual is only interconnected with aggression in contexts where the ritual is violated. At the same time, in the realm of language aggression there is a set of aggressive ritualistic practices that are worth studying on their own. They include:

* A wide variety of practices in which ritualistic conflict and aggression gets normalised, spanning the case of the previously discussed military training (Bousfield 2007; Culpeper 1996), through scenes of online communal war games, to rap battles,
* Contradictory practices, such as rites of communal humiliation (Example 2), instances of school bullying, and so on.

The former type of normalised cases of rites of conflict and aggression – i.e. cases in which being conflictive and aggressive represents an everyday quasi-ordinary activity – are particularly relevant to illustrate the role of ritualised conflict and aggression in social life. One could argue that, for those who expect conflict and aggression as regularity, deviations from such expectations may index hidden meanings. However, we may also point out that this kind of institutionalised and regularised conflict and aggression may not count as routinised activity in a Garfinkelian sense simply because genuine conflict and aggression – unlike, e.g., banter (Culpeper 2011) – may ultimately never become fully ordinary, even though people may normalise conflict and aggression if they are exposed to them as a practice (Boxer et al. 2008). To illustrate this point, let us refer here to another anecdote in which the first author was also involved:

(5)

1. DK: ((grins and whispers)) This (.) is bloody killing me.

2. SK: ((smiles and whispers back)) I know, he is [

3. LB: ((shouts)) [ladies, you are here to fight, not to chat

4. DK and SK stop talking and continue trying to desperately throw each other.

DK is an ardent judo practitioner, and in one of the training sessions he engaged a ‘newaza’ (ground grappling) session with a friend, SK. Note that while judo is a ‘mild’ martial art in the sense that players are supposed to avoid causing injury, fighting sessions are scenes of ritual aggression: judo fights are genuine and their goal is to force the opponent to tap out (i.e. there is a sense of ritual conflict involved as only one person can win). This is why engaging in a friendly whispering was (rightly) sanctioned by the coach LB: in line 3 he reminds DK and SK that they are violating the order of normalised ritualistic aggression. His interruption, which is ratified due to LB’s status (Goffman 1967) reinstates the order of things. ILB’s labelling of DK and SK as ‘girls’ is a masculine, ideologically loaded moral appeal: many perceive judo fighting as a masculine ritual event (not quite correctly, as judo is practised by both women and men), and ‘civil’ whispering disturbs the moral order of the event also in this ideological sense.

In Figure 6, the position of what we define as ‘ritual’ approach here – without claiming that rituals are relevant only to this line of inquiry – is as follows

conflict and morally condemned aggression

 c

Moralising reactions/gut feelings and related moralising judgements:

Individual as ‘owner’ of morality

Morality = assumed ability → Projected to norms, principles and ideologies

conflict and justified aggression

 c

Moral order comes into operation in interaction: Individual is responsible for the ‘order’

Centred on rights and obligations, the violation of which triggers gut feelings, conflict and moralisation

embodiment

Reinterpreting, meta-debating, and ethicalising aggression

*Figure 6: Interactional ritual approaches to morality, moral order and language conflict and aggression*

Since rituals are loaded with the norms and ideologies of the social unit that deploys them (Collins 2004), an interactional ritual model, in our view, needs to depart from looking into the broader moral norms, principles and ideologies that fuel a particular ritual practice as the analysis of example (5) illustrated.

 In this section, we have examined approaches to morality and the moral order in the context of language conflict and aggression. While this methodological overview is unavoidably narrow due to limitations on space, and ultimately approaches to language aggression may be too diverse to be fit into a single set of criteria, we hope that categorising research in a system where morality, moral order, and language conflict and aggression interrelate, in terms of focal points on parts of this system, opens up further academic discussions.

**4. Conclusion**

In this ‘position’ paper, we have overviewed what we regard as the most important features of the relationship between the moral order and morality in the context of language conflict and aggression. We have investigated the question of how morality and the moral order of things relate to conflict and aggression. While in previous pragmatic research the concepts of morality and moral order have been rarely brought together, we have illustrated that they are inseparable, in particular in the context of aggression. We have elaborated an analytic model (Figure 3) – with replicability in mind – which captures the dynamic relationship between these phenomena: the model is centred on the idea that perceived a) violations of the moral order, b) breaches of moral norms, principles and ideologies, c) conflict and d) aggression constitute a cluster. The explanatory power of this dynamics resides in that it can give account of a variety of seemingly unrelated scenarios, such as conflicts triggered by the violation of interactional norms v. rites of moral aggression. Along with elaborating the model, we have explored the relationship between various methodologies through which one can examine morality and the moral order in the context of language conflict and aggression.

 Due to the relative novelty of morality and moral order in the fields of linguistic pragmatics and language conflict and aggression, there are many intriguing areas for linguistic pragmatics to explore. For instance, a noteworthy question is how the moral agenda in linguistic pragmatics can be integrated into cross-cultural and intercultural pragmatic research. While cross-cultural psychology has broadly studied cross-cultural differences between moral norms (see an overview in Spencer-Oatey and Kádár 2016), it remains to be investigated whether the existence of culturally situated moral similarities and differences can be rigorously evidenced by using interactional data, considering that a body of pragmatic research operates with significantly smaller datasets than psychologists use. Another major question is to investigate how linguistic pragmatic research on morality and moral order – and their relationship with conflict and aggression – can contribute to inquiries conducted in other disciplines, such as sociology or education. Such questions indicate that the area studied has a lot to offer for future explorations.

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2. Note that the feeling that the *other* is responsible prevails in scenes of conflict and aggression (see Section 2 for a more detailed discussion). Conflicts in which responsibility is attributed to oneself may trigger aggression, but most of the time they generate other feelings. As Bergmann (1998: 287) argues, “if blame is not attributed to participant but to self, we may find … admissions, confessions, apologies, and remorse or, in case of denial, excuses and justifications”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is why psychologists have been able to identify pre-existing universal foundations of morality, even though psychological research has also demonstrated that there is a significant degree of cultural variation in these foundations (see the ‘Moral Foundations Theory’ in Graham et al. 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In the present paper, we use ‘morally condemned’ rather broadly as an analytic construct, i.e. not according to the legal meaning of this term. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. As research such as Sutton et al. (1999) has demonstrated, even when people know that what they do is wrong they tend to position it as morally justifiable. There are exceptions to this tendency, such as forms of behavioural disorder when someone intends to do wrong. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Because of this, conversation analysts who in a sense claimed ownership of ethnomethodology “de-center[ed] morality by focusing instead on interaction and social structural organization” (Bergman, ibid.), following Schegloff’s (1988) criticism of ‘face’. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)