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Moral talk: debates about its forms, functions and value in political life

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The ways in which people use language to make moral claims is a matter of much discussion in philosophy, and has been for centuries. However, it has not received much attention in linguistics, including in those fields of linguistics (sociolinguistics, discourse analysis) which are centrally concerned with the things that people use language to do. We therefore know little about what morally evaluative language, as a form of situated social action actually looks like. What forms does it take? What is it used to do? How is it understood?

In the UK at least, this academic situation became a matter of broader political significance when, following the 2007 financial crisis, political leaders from various different positions, as well as church leaders and intellectuals (including communications consultants), argued that a reinvigoration of moral language was needed in political life. Moral language became a matter of intense discussion, but without any strong sense of what kind of talk was at the centre of such discussions, or indeed, of what such talk was supposed to do for political leaders. Was it intended to be mere 'virtue-signalling' (to use a term introduced in political commentary at the time)? Worse still, perhaps the aim was to reduce political rhetoric to pure irrational appeal.

I seek to bring a sociolinguistic perspective to bear on morally evaluative language, as it was used in British political life during this period. This has involved investigating attested language events in which speakers (political leaders and members of the public) made moral claims, looking closely at the language they use to do so, at the linguistic and social context, and the ways in which others respond to those claims. My argument, in keeping with sociolinguistic thought about various forms of linguistic action, is that moral talk was (and is) something that takes place in a range of context-dependent ways in order to perform a wide range of functions, and, crucially that its value – in political and ethical terms – depends very much on the quite sophisticated (and sometimes conflictual) ways in which it is understood by members of the communities in which it is used.