

# Ethics, Language, and Human Sociality

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In the spirit of interdisciplinary collaboration that has inspired this volume, I will discuss some of the ways in which I think recent work in linguistic anthropology and related fields has shown that elements of the ethical are built into language at its core and how this work can shed new light on the role played by language in ethical thought and action. First, what do we mean by “ethics”? Whatever else the notion may involve, a wide range of philosophers (e.g., Hume 1957 [1751], Smith 1976, Rousseau 1979, B. Williams 1985: 12, Ricoeur 1992: 172, Levinas 1998) agree that ethics necessarily involves acting with regard for another person or people.<sup>1</sup> Another point of widespread if not universal agreement is that, across the range of natural species, the ethical is a uniquely human capacity. This conjunction seems unlikely to be an accidental one. While I am hardly the first to suspect as much, it seems to me that the conjunction itself is not too obvious to be worth pointing out and that there is more to be said about why it is a necessary one in light of some basic features of

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1. Others, such as Nietzsche, Foucault, and perhaps Aristotle, place more emphasis on regard for the self, but this and a capacity for acting with regard for others are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the former may even presuppose the latter.

language and its relation to human sociality. For a start, consider the following classic statement by linguist Emile Benveniste concerning a kind of grammatical category that is found in every human language, the category of *person*:

I use *I* only when I am speaking to someone who will be a *you* in my address. It is this condition of dialogue that is constitutive of *person*, for it implies that reciprocally *I* becomes *you* in the address of the one who in turn designates himself as *I*. Language is possible only because each speaker sets himself up as a *subject* by referring to himself as *I* in his discourse. Because of this, *I* posits another person, the one who, being, as he is, completely exterior to “me,” becomes my echo, to whom I say *you* and who says *you* to me. This polarity of persons is the fundamental condition in language [and] . . . offers a type of opposition whose equivalent is offered nowhere outside language. This polarity does not mean either equality or symmetry: “ego” always has a position of transcendence with regard to *you*. Nevertheless, neither of the terms can be conceived without the other: they are complementary, though according to an “interior/exterior” opposition, and, at the same time, are reversible. If we seek a parallel to this, we will not find it. The condition of man in language is unique. (Benveniste 1971: 224–25)

### *Ethics and Human Sociality: A Natural History*

Whatever else may be entailed by the notion of “ethics,” surely the reversibility of perspectives that Benveniste points to is an essential element of it. And insofar as ethics involves acting with regard for others, it is something that is not only enabled by language but is positively required by it, since ordinary use of the “person” categories that are found in every language is impossible without it. Below I will discuss other categories of language besides person and show how this pertains to them also, but first I will step back from the focus on language per se and turn to a consideration of a more wide-ranging body of recent work to which Benveniste’s observations on language can be related. I refer to the newly emerging interdisciplinary synthesis concerning what Nicholas Enfield and Stephen Levinson (2006) call the “roots of human sociality.” In their introduction to the volume by that name, which came out of the 2005 Wenner-Gren Symposium that they organized on the topic, Enfield and Levinson begin by declaring that “At the heart of the uniquely human way of life is our peculiarly intense, mentally mediated, and highly structured way of interacting with one another. This rests on participation in a common mental

world, a world in which we have detailed expectations about each other's knowledge, intentions and motivations" (Enfield and Levinson 2006: 1).

How is that world constructed, and what is the nature of the uniquely human capacity that enables it? Obviously language plays a big part, and until recently its evolution would have been cited by nearly everyone—in line with Benveniste—as the single most important enabling condition for the forms of social interaction and mental life to which Enfield and Levinson point. But this view has had to be modified in recent years in light of new work by a number of researchers in developmental psychology, primatology, and evolutionary anthropology, such as Daniel Stern, Colwyn Trevarthen, Peter Hobson, and Michael Tomasello. Of particular relevance is the work of Tomasello and his colleagues, who work both with children and with nonhuman primates and whose findings compare interestingly with those of Peter Hobson and others working with autistic children (and who, on basis of far more substantial empirical work than most evolutionary psychologists have done, find themselves radically at odds with most of their views<sup>2</sup>).

Corroborating the earlier findings of M. C. Bateson (1979), Tomasello and his team have found that, long before children begin to speak, they engage in "proto-conversations" with adults and older children in which they exchange roles and perspectives with them. What is most distinctively human about those interactions is that many of them are not just dyadic but triadic, involving joint attention to a third person or object outside of the immediate circuit of interaction between infant and other. At nine to twelve months of age, still before beginning to speak, children show an operational capacity to understand that other humans are intentional beings like themselves, to construe their actions as goal-directed ones, to understand their point, and to collaborate with others in triadic interactions, in the course of which they attend both to the object of shared attention and to the person with whom they are jointly attending to it, whom they understand to be doing the same with respect to themselves. Many of the triadic interactions that infants engage in before speech are

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2. A basic tenet of evolutionary psychology is that, as a result of evolved psychological adaptations to aspects of the ancestral environment, the human brain is hardwired with a number of distinct cognitive "modules," or specialized capacities (e.g., to acquire language, numeracy, knowledge of certain kinds of objects, etc.). By contrast, Tomasello (1999: 203ff) posits a single adaptation—a new way of identifying with and understanding conspecifics as intentional beings—as a general capacity that has allowed for the development of all the others by enabling "cultural learning."

ones they themselves initiate, including, from about nine or ten months of age, acts of pointing to objects during which they attend both to the object and to the gaze direction of the person with whom they are interacting. Other primates too—especially our closest relatives the chimpanzees and bonobos—show a “sophistication in understanding many important aspects of intentional action” but by contrast with humans, they “seem to lack the motivations and skills for even the most basic forms of sharing psychological states with others. . . . Similarly, . . . systematic observations of chimpanzees and bonobo mothers and infants with objects reveals very little triadic engagement, and none that appears to involve a shared goal” (Tomasello et al. 2005: 685).

These observations have profound implications for our understanding of human sociality, for at least two reasons.

1. They show that some of its basic features, which are often thought of (by Benveniste, for example) as being dependent on language—mutuality of perspective, capacity for shared intentionality and role reversal—in fact begin to develop in infants long before language does and are quite highly developed by the time that children begin to speak.
2. They show that those features are, nonetheless, distinctive to the human species—as distinctive to it as language is.

Based largely on these two facts, and on the fact that the features in question are built into the nature of language, Tomasello (1999; cf. Tomasello et al. 2005) argues that the relevant human capacities actually evolved before language and were what made it and “cultural learning” possible. Whether or not that conclusion is correct, the research findings on which it is based are directly relevant for our understanding of the ethical dimension of human social life, as they show that some of its basic elements are, ontogenetically at least, even more basic than language and, indeed, part of a special capacity for taking into account the intentions of others that underlies not only language use but other forms of human communication as well.<sup>3</sup> The same conclusion is supported by researchers who contributed to the Enfield-Levinson symposium from a number of different fields besides psychology and primatology, including linguistic pragmatics, conversational analysis, and linguistic anthropology (Enfield and Levinson 2006).

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3. It is perhaps needless to say that the same capacity allows humans to act *unethically*, greatly increasing our ability to deceive and exploit each other for selfish purposes, as has been extensively explored in the literature on “Machiavelian intelligence.”

I cannot review any of that other work here. Rather, I turn to a consideration of some aspects of language that are especially relevant for understanding how the ethical is implicated in language use. Of special interest here are the kinds of grammatical categories that are ubiquitous across the languages of the world—most or all of the relevant ones being indexical categories in the sense that their referential values are intrinsically linked to aspects of the contexts in which they are used.<sup>4</sup>

*Ethics and Language: A Review of Some  
Relevant Grammatical Categories*

PERSON

This category has already been introduced above by the quote from Benveniste and my discussion of it. But some further remarks are in order. First, the category of person itself is realized not only by personal pronouns, as in Benveniste's examples involving the pronouns *I* and *you*, but also, in many languages, including the Papuan one to be discussed below, by the form of the verb (as in Spanish: *voy*, "I go"; *vas*, "you go"; *va*, "he/she/it goes," etc.). Moreover, many of the world's languages encode finer distinctions of person and number than Indo-European ones do, including, for example, a dual number and "inclusive" versus "exclusive" distinction in the first person, so that, for example, instead of a single first person plural form, such as English "we," there may be four distinct pronouns or person categories corresponding to "I and thou," "I and you (plural)," "I and one other person who is not you," "I and at least two other persons, neither of whom is you." Also relevant is the phenomenon found in many languages of the world, including almost all European ones other than English, whereby the choice of pronouns and person categories used in reference to the addressee indexes aspects of the social relationship between her and the speaker, such as the degree of imputed social distance and/or hierarchical disparity between them (Brown and Gilman 1960, Agha 2007: 278–300). And in some Australian Aboriginal languages, different personal pronouns are used according to the classificatory kin relationship not only between speaker and addressee but among the people

4. This brief review of grammatical categories does not by any means include all the ethically pertinent ones, only those that are taken up in the ethnographic examples below. Among other relevant categories, one that has had to be excluded here for length reasons is (socio)spatial deixis, for which see Hanks (1990), Rumsey (2003a:174–75).

referred to by the various nonsingular forms in all the nonaddressee categories as well (Hercus and White 1973, cf. Merlan 1989).

In all of these cases, we can see that the choice that must be made among person categories in order to speak necessarily requires the speaker to take up a position within a complex social field. Especially if we take into consideration the fact that many of these choices are not entirely determined by preexisting social “facts” but are part of what establishes them as such, we can see that these choices are by nature ethical ones. And even where the relevant social facts are solidly established in advance of the act of pronoun use, for example, by the Tamil caste system (Levinson 1977) or Australian Aboriginal protocols for dealing with one’s mother-in-law (e.g., Haviland 1979, 220–21, Rumsey 1982: 168), the relevant norms are, *inter alia*, ethical ones, whose observance is evaluated accordingly.

#### REPORTED (A.K.A. ‘‘PROJECTED’’) SPEECH

It is a remarkable fact that every known language includes formal means for placing any given speech event into a kind of dialogical relationship with another one, whether real or imagined. The available forms of reported speech in any given language seem always to include what is known as “direct discourse” or “quotation,” in which all the indexical categories of the “reported” utterance—person, spatial deixis, tense, etc.—are grounded in the “reported” speech event, for example, “Arthur said ‘*Mr. Tite Barnacle is a buttoned-up man*, and consequently a weighty one.’” In many languages they also include various varieties of “indirect” discourse, in which some or all of the indexical categories are shifted so as to ground them in the “reporting” speech event, for example, “Arthur remarked that Mr. Tite Barnacle was a buttoned up man, and consequently a weighty one.” The brilliant work of Bakhtin (1981) and Vološhinov (1973) has both shown how pervasive a role is played by reported speech in the creation of evaluative stances in discourse, and placed it in relation to the wider range of discursive phenomena that have been studied under the rubric of “voicing.”

These include not only explicit attributions of speech or thought by one speaker to another, as in the above examples, but also implicit ones, such as the one by Charles Dickens—or, perhaps more accurately, by the implied author of *Little Dorrit*—when he says about one of his characters “*Mr. Tite Barnacle was a buttoned-up man*, and consequently a weighty

one.”<sup>5</sup> Though the author does not frame this statement explicitly as reported speech, even of the “indirect” variety, other, more subtle aspects of the framing make it clear, at least to readers familiar with the mores of Victorian England, that this statement is being voiced from the point of view of a particular element of Victorian society, which the author is holding up to ridicule for, among other things, the assumption he imputes to them that “clothes make the man.” Though this is done in a humorous way, the evaluative stance behind it is a serious one and exemplifies both the centrality of the ethical dimension in Dickens’s works and, more generally, the way in which reported speech and the more general phenomenon of voicing is tied up with ethics. Below I will be discussing some other examples from actual speech rather than written fiction. For others I refer the reader to the excellent discussion of voice as a modality of the ethical in the essay by Webb Keane in this volume.

#### MOOD AND MODALITY

Another set of ubiquitous grammatical categories that require the speaker to take up a position in relation to others are those of “mood” and “modality.” With respect to their meanings, these fall into two broad classes known to grammarians and logicians as “epistemic” modality and “deontic” modality. Epistemic modality concerns the nature and degree of the speaker’s avowed commitment to the factual status of what she is saying and is expressed through grammatical categories such as the indicative (“John came”), subjunctive (“John might have come”), and negative (“John didn’t come”); deontic modality has to do with the speaker’s commitment to the desirability or necessity of what she is predicating and is expressed through categories such as the optative (“May John always come”), obligative (“John must come”), and imperative (“John, come!”).

Among formal grammatical categories associated with deontic modality, in many ways the most basic is the imperative mood. As has often been pointed out, (e.g., Palmer 1986: 29, 108), across the world’s languages, there is a strong tendency for the imperative form of the verb to be the simplest one. The imperative is basic in another, related way: it is one of the first grammatical categories that infants learn to use and understand. In a preliminary study based on language-acquisition data from four languages around the world (Rumsey 2003a: 174–83), I have found that in all of them the imperative was not only one of the first forms of the verb to

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5. This example is taken from Bakhtin (1981: 305).

be acquired but it was acquired well before the category of person. This is especially interesting with respect to the phenomenon of reciprocity of perspective and its relation to language, because the ordinary use of the imperative involves precisely the sort of commutability that Benveniste took to be associated with pronouns and the linguistic category of person. To grasp the force of “Stop!” or “Eat your sweet potato!” for example, a child must be able to understand that the wish being expressed is the speaker’s and that he or she, the addressee, is the one being enjoined to perform the action. To use the imperative the child must be able to understand that these roles are thereby reversed.

Having reviewed three of the basic categories in terms of which the ethical is implicated in language I now turn to some ethnographic examples of how it works in practice, which are drawn from my work over the past three decades, partly in collaboration with Francesca Merlan, in the Ku Waru region of Highland Papua New Guinea.

### *Case 1: Taka and Laplin*

The following is an excerpt from a conversation that took place near the public meeting ground at Kailge in the western Nebilyer Valley. The speakers are a man named Taka and his fifteen-month old son, Laplin.

1. Taka: *mawa wi to*  
           (boy’s name) call out do(imperative)  
           Call out to Mawa.
2. Laplin: [shouts] *mawai!*  
           Hey Mawa!
3. Taka: *kar-na pabiyl wa! kar!*  
           car(locative) go(optative;       come(imperative) The car!  
   first person dual)  
           Come, let’s you and me go in the car! The car!
4. Laplin: *wa*  
           come(imperative)  
           Come!

Laplin here has had a directive addressed to him with an imperative verb, telling him to call out to a boy called Mawa, who is passing by. Laplin does so, using the correct vocative ending *ai* and intonation *ai!* In



the words spoken by Taka to Laplin in the next line (3), the assumed speaker associated with the first person dual subject marking on the verb *pabiyl* (“Let’s go!”) is not the person from whose mouth they come, Taka, but his addressee, Laplin. Taka is, as we say, putting words into Laplin’s mouth, prompting him to shout them out to Mawa. Laplin responds to this by repeating a single word of the grammatically complex utterance with which he has been prompted, the imperative form *wa* “come.”

In grammatical terms, these few lines of speech involving a very young child already include all three of the categories discussed above: *person* (in the first person dual subject marking on the verb *pabiyl* in line 3), *mood* (the imperative verbs in lines 1, 3, and 4 and the optative in line 3), and *projected speech* (in line 3). In interactional terms, what is going on here involves triadic relations at two distinct levels. Line 1 involves one among the speaker Taka, the addressee Laplin, and the referent Mawa. Its effect is to bring Laplin into a circuit of joint attention between him and Taka, whose object is Mawa and to enjoin an action to be directed at him by Taka, namely, the action of calling out Mawa’s name. Laplin’s response in line 2 shows that he has understood this and in turn establishes the ground for the second triadic interaction, which Taka projects in line 3.

That projected interaction is at a meta-level in relation to the one between Taka and Laplin in that the third term that is involved in the exchange between the two of them is not just the boy Mawa but another projected triad: a ventriloquized exchange between Laplin and Mawa in which the third term is the car—or, more precisely, a proposed trip in the car that Laplin and Mawa would make together. In other words, there are two interactional frames here: the initial one involving Taka and Laplin, and another one involving Laplin and Mawa. Both of Laplin’s utterances belong to both of those frames at once, in that they are positioned both as responses to Taka and as utterances addressed to Mawa, as prompted in ventriloquized form by Taka.

As shown by Bambi Schieffelin’s (1990) detailed study of child language socialization among the nearby Kaluli people, this kind of ventriloquizing is ubiquitous in speech to infants, not only by adults but also by older children, often at the prompting of adults. It is a powerful form of subjectification, especially when the action being enjoined is speech to another, in that it presents to the child not only a model of interaction in which his or her subjectivity is virtually aligned with that of the caregiver, but also a model of what to expect in engagements with others. In the ventriloquized words in line 3, for example, Taka is presenting to Laplin a model of what, in order to get Mawa’s attention, he can assume will be an alluring prospect

for him, namely, a trip in the community's only motor vehicle to the provincial capital Mount Hagen. In other words, through a directive that Laplin is enjoined to issue to another, Laplin is himself being placed within an established landscape—an ethical landscape—of differentially valued places and kinds of movement within it, and ways of feeling about it.

The main point I want to draw from this example is that, from the very earliest stages of language acquisition, children here as elsewhere are inducted into forms of language use and associated grammatical categories that require them to act with regard for others. The example also shows the important role played by modality, in particular the imperative mood, in speech to and by children. At that earliest stage, the imperative plays a more important role than the category of person. This is interesting in relation to questions of ethics in that the imperative is, par excellence, the form that speakers use to make demands on one another, and it shows that, in developmental terms at least, these are more basic than acts of reference to the self and other by whom those demands are voiced and on whom they are enjoined. They are also more basic than overt reference to ethical precepts—a point to which I will return below.

*Case 2: Warfare, Ceremonial Exchange, and the  
Ethics of Bigmanship at Kailge*

I turn now to some examples of the role played by the grammatical categories I have reviewed above in the speech of adults and in their ethical positioning of themselves in relation to one another. The examples come from speeches made at two intergroup exchange events arising from the Marsupial Road War of 1982, at which compensation payments were made by one of the belligerent groups to another that had fought alongside them as allies.

One of the distinctive features of the oratory at such events is the use of what Francesca Merlan and I (1991) call “segmentary person” forms, in which singular and dual pronouns and verb forms are used to personify the relevant social identities (e.g., “I killed you” means “My clan fought with your clan and killed some people in it,” even if the fighting took place before the speaker and addressee were born). Such usages are by nature ethically charged in that they entail taking responsibility for the actions of the group over the long term and attributing it to others on the same basis.

The first example concerns the role of a leading “big man,” Kujilyi, who played a role both in the recruitment by his tribe cluster, which I will call Cluster A, of tribe pair B to the fighting and in organizing the compensation payment that was owed by A to B for injuries they suffered in it. In Kujilyi’s speeches (as transcribed in Merlan and Rumsey 1991: 247–54, 260–71), he works to position himself as a mediator rather than a *pul* (“owner,” “source,” “base”) of the fight. In order to do this, he makes subtle use of shifts between the group-personifying “segmentary” sense of the first person singular and a more ordinary sense in which he is referring to himself as a single person. At the group level, he resists the characterization that has been made of him as a “fight source” in two ways. The first is by pointing out that, as everyone knows, the fight originally broke out as a dispute within another tribe pair, D, as a result of which one of the disputants fled from D and moved in with cluster A.

Having first traced the etiology of the fight back to a source that is not even within his own tribe cluster, Kujilyi then in effect denies ultimate responsibility for it in another way, by recourse to finer gradations of segmentary difference than are evident in my unitary reference to “cluster A.” Kujilyi points out that only one of the tribes within that cluster, Epola, first took up the dispute, because of their affinal link to the refugee from tribe pair D. But then, because the Epola were on the verge of defeat, says Kujilyi, “I sort of took it [the fight] up and put it on my own skin [i.e., made myself liable for it].<sup>6</sup> The “I” in this formulation can be taken to refer either to Kujilyi himself, to his tribe, the Midipu, or to the Midipu together with its paired tribe, the Kusika. As in many uses of the first person singular by big men, this formulation obviates the difference between the segmentary sense of “I” and the ordinary one, since, Kujilyi being the principal big man of this tribe or tribe pair, insofar as he acts, it acts, and vice versa.

While thus denying that he was an original “owner” or “source” of the fight, Kujilyi owns up to having taken responsibility for his own tribe’s having come to the aid of the Epola and Alya, and for then soliciting aid from pair B, the Kopia and Kubuka tribes. That act is subject to conflicting construals by various subsequent speakers, mostly notably by a series of Kopia speakers, who liken Kujilyi’s solicitation of military aid to the work

6. For the Ku Waru original, see Merlan and Rumsey (1991: 291, l. 1135). For a detailed account of Kujilyi’s role in these events and the speeches made by and about him, see Merlan and Rumsey (1991: 130–36).

of a prostitute, casting his recruitment of their tribe pair as an opportunistic one, which is by implication unlikely to turn into a real “marriage.” Interestingly, this figure is introduced in reported speech, by a Kopia orator, Kupena, who attributes it to Kujilyi himself, as something he has supposedly either said or thought to himself. Later on in his speech, Kupena develops the image further in what are patently his own words, saying that Kujilyi “copulated with us all and brought us into the fight.”<sup>7</sup> This figure is picked up by subsequent orators from Kopia and elaborated in various ways, describing how Kujilyi as prostitute had washed himself off and prettied himself up in preparation for his task, etc. Kujilyi in his subsequent speeches neither acknowledges nor denies having likened himself to a prostitute, but he gives the image a more positive spin by likening himself to an unmarried young women, presumably one to whom Kopia-Kubuka had been attracted on a more honorable basis and to whom they would stay “married” as a continuing ally.

In all of this give and take, Kujilyi’s actions are made the subject of intense ethical labor, both by himself and others. At this, the first of several exchange events that were precipitated by those actions.

### *Case 3: The Intervention of the Kulka Women’s Club*

The war from which the above-discussed compensation claims arose was ended by a remarkable intervention by a local women’s cooperative work group. On September 13, 1982 women from the club, all wearing shirts bearing the national emblem of Papua New Guinea, marched in between the opposing armies and exhorted the men in both to lay down their arms and go home. The women brought with them garden produce, money, cigarettes, and bottled soft drinks, which they offered as gifts to both sides in equal measure. They also brought with them the national flag, which they planted on the battlefield. The men accepted their offer and did as they were told. It was a bold act, which no one expected at the time. Elsewhere Merlan and I (1991; Rumsey 2000, 2003b) have analyzed the women’s action in detail, arguing that it was made possible by a particular set of circumstances, including the group’s perceived association with “government law” and “business,” its identification with a neutral tribe, and

7. More literally, and more interestingly, what Kupena says, using the group-personifying “segmentary” first person singular, is that Kujilyi “copulated with all of me” (*na payl topa*), where the understood referent of “I/me” is the Kopia tribe of the pair of Kopia and Kubuka.

the interstitial position of women in general with respect to the male-dominated order of segmentary groups in the region.

To say that these were enabling conditions is not to say that the group's success followed automatically from them. Rather, the group demonstrated a profound capacity for what I would call "ethical imagination," whereby, even in the total absence of any direct precedent for their intervention, the women recognized the novel circumstances they were in as ones that might empower them to act in ways that everyone could see the good in, and they did so with implacable resolve and stunning *éclat*.

At two exchange events subsequent to the one in Case 2, where each of the principal combatant sides gave compensation to their allies, payments were also presented to the women's group, and its leaders appeared as orators—the first time that women had ever done so at such an event. Examining the women's speeches in detail, Merlan and I (1991) have shown how they drew upon both the newly established rhetorics of "government law" and "business," and upon features of traditional male oratory, creating for themselves a new, hybrid speaking position that was both subversive of the segmentary order and complexly entangled with it. One of the features of traditional oratory the women drew upon was the totalizing use of grammatical person categories that I have discussed above, as in the following lines from one of their speeches:

elti el tiringl-kiyl-o kanilka-o  
you two fought, and I, seeing it

kapola naa mel tirim kanap-o  
I, seeing that it was not a good thing

el kani-yl yi te-n mol-o  
that fight, no man

na-ni gai punya-na konturud-o  
but I in the sweet potato garden stopped it (Merlan and Rumsey 1991: 186)

This excerpt contains, in the first line, a segmentary second person dual reference "You two fought," referring to whole tribes, and in the second and fourth lines, first person singular forms that can be taken, in the characteristic segmentary person manner, as referring both to the speaker and to the social totality with which she is identified.

But exactly what is the social totality of identification here? In this case the indeterminacy is not just a matter of the scope of the social identity in question (tribe *versus* tribe pair, etc.) but of its very nature. To be sure, the woman's group has a segmentary identity, Kulka, but not because the

women themselves are of the Kulka tribe. Most of them are not, but rather have married into it. Rather, given the range of interests and identities in which the Kulka women's group's action is grounded, Kopil's totalizing "I" cannot be construed in any single way, but rather in any or all of the following:

I, Kopil, a leader of the Kulka women's group  
 We the Kulka women's group, which I embody as its leader.  
 We, the forces of "government law"  
 We women.

The fact that there is an established Ku Waru genre employing segmentary person reference provides a way for Kopil to cast her person references as totalizing ones. Yet the fact that the references were being spoken by *her* in these particular circumstances meant that the social totalities being invoked could not be of the usual segmentary sort: they must instead be construed in novel ways such as the above, creating a mutual alignment among these various identities. This creative act, and the novel political intervention in which it figured, are a prime example of what I mean by the "ethical imagination."

For understanding how this works, I find useful a distinction made by Bernard Williams between two different kinds of ethical consideration (one broadly Kantian and the other Aristotelian). The first is based on obligation and duty, which by nature

look backwards, or at least sideways. The acts they require, supposing that one is deliberating about what to do, lie in the future, but the reasons for those acts lie in the fact that I have already promised, the job I have undertaken, the position I am already in. Another kind of ethical consideration looks forward, to the outcomes of the acts open to me. "It will be for the best" may be taken as the general form of this kind of consideration. (B. Williams 1985: 8)

It seems to me that especially in deliberations about what will be for the best the ethical imagination can come to the fore and in some cases lead to action that creates an expanded sense of what can be. The Kulka Women's Club's action was clearly forward looking in this way, rather than being grounded in any existing obligation or duty. And what Williams (1985: 14 *et passim*) would have called a relevant "ethical constituency" deemed it to have opened up new possibilities for the future.

### Conclusion

In this essay I have explored the ethical dimension of human social life from three very different perspectives: the phylogeny of the human species; ontogeny as exemplified from my work with children in Highland Papua New Guinea; and, from the same region, the ethics of intergroup politics and wealth exchange. From the first of these perspectives, drawing on recent work in primatology and evolutionary anthropology, I have established that crucial prerequisites of the ethical—the ability to understand and participate in the psychological states of others and the propensity for doing so—are distinctively human traits. Crucial in this regard is the ability to participate in triadic interactions in which the interacting parties jointly focus their attention on a common object, share and exchange intentions with respect to it, and collaborate in joint action with respect to it.

As for ontogeny, through their interaction with older conspecifics, human infants acquire these skills before they learn to speak. As they begin to acquire a language, the skills are put to new uses. At the same time, they are developed in new ways by the child's entry into language. This is true in part because, as I have discussed above, there are certain grammatical categories within every language that require interlocutors to exchange perspectives with each other.<sup>8</sup> These include the categories of person, mood, and reported speech. Using a sample of conversational interaction involving an infant, I have shown how each of these categories figures in such exchanges of perspective, and how in the process, from the very earliest stages of language acquisition, these perspectives and the messages conveyed from them are charged with ethical import.

Especially important in this respect are imperatives—not the abstract imperatives of moral philosophers, and certainly not the lofty “categorical imperative” of Kant—but ordinary everyday imperative verbs, like the ones that figure in Bourdieu's famous “implicit pedagogy, capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy, through injunctions as insignificant as ‘stand up straight’ or ‘don't hold your knife in your left hand’” (Bourdieu 1977: 94). While I would not go as far as Bourdieu does in suggesting that whole cosmologies, metaphysical

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8. Another huge difference that language makes is that, as Webb Keane reminded us at the Toronto conference, it allows actions to be construed and evaluated as actions of a given *type*. Though I cannot go into that point here, it is richly exemplified in cases 2 and 3 above.

systems, or political philosophies can be instilled *solely* through such injunctions—or indeed, that they ever are instilled in toto—I would agree with, for example, Schieffelin (1990) and Don Kulick (1992) that mundane communicative practices and interactional routines provide one of the main bases on which more enduring sociocultural forms are reproduced and transformed, and through which subjectivity is constituted as social being.

Among humans beyond the age of about twenty to twenty-four months, a crucial role is also played in this process by the person categories of language, as discerned by Benveniste and as is evident in all the examples discussed above. But the examples also show that this is rather more complicated than Benveniste (1971: 225) allows when he says that “each speaker sets himself up as a subject by referring to himself as *I* in his discourse” and thereby posits another person (the *you*) who is “completely exterior to ‘me.’” As we have seen in case 1, even in speech to an infant Taka uses a first person form in ventriloquized speech that in effect posits another person as himself and vice versa. In case 2, similar considerations apply to Kupena’s use of the first person when attributing to Kujilyi the thought that he, Kujilyi, had acted like a prostitute. In both of these cases, there is not a simple relation of “exteriority” between the “I” and the “you” but an interplay between them within the speech of a single person. In cases 2 and 3, we have seen examples of the segmentary “I,” in which the relation is not only one of interplay—for example, between the segmentary sense of Kujilyi’s “I” and the personal one—but also one of “amplification” and “personification,” whereby the “I” personifies an enduring segmentary group identity and takes responsibility for its actions, as seen in those examples.

Of course, none of this takes place entirely in language or speech. At the exchange events from which my oratorical examples are taken, for instance, equally important is the grounding of the interactions in a public performance space that is constructed as an oriented microcosm of the larger surrounding space of tribal and clan territories with which the participating groups are identified (Merlan and Rumsey 1991: 125–28, 163–67) and in a long history involving macro-level institutions and processes that are only in part linguistic or semiotic (*ibid.*: 34–87, 198–220, 239–44; cf. Keane 1997, and in this volume). Without in any way discounting the importance of such embedding of the verbal within more inclusive interactional frames and sociocultural contexts, the main focus of this chapter has been on the ways in which some central aspects of language itself provide



part of the basis for ethical action by engaging its users in forms of regard for the other.

The main way in which I hope my treatment of these phenomena will have pushed the boundaries of existing work in linguistic and sociocultural anthropology is through my focus on joint attention and shared intentionality as providing a pivot in relation to which the exchange of perspectives is grounded. Though I cannot go into the matter here (but see, e.g., Crapanzano 1992: 70–90, Tomasello 1999, Hobson 2004), I believe that triadic interactions of that kind provide an essential bridge between the consciousness, intentionality, and agency of particular persons and the larger lifeworld they inhabit. With regard to the ethical domain (among others), a very important fact about that bridge is that the traffic across it runs in both directions. So, for example, in the Marsupial Road War of 1982, the Kulka women's group acted out of shared concern for what was happening on the battlefield and took an action that altered the ethical horizon for everyone involved.

At the second exchange event of 1983, in which tribe cluster A as the "owners" of the fight paid compensation to pair B, the Kulka Women's Club participated as one of the parties to whom a payment was also owed for their role in stopping the fight. There is a tacit protocol whereby the staging of such events often reenacts the ones for which the compensation is owed. So at this event there was a mock charge, in which men from B ran onto the display ground in battle dress, shouting as they had at the fight and brandishing spears and bows and arrows. Likewise, the Kulka Women's Club appeared, wearing their club shirts with the national insignia and carrying the national flag, which they planted on the display ground just as they had done on the battlefield. A leading Kulka big man, Pokea, whose daughter was one of the group's leaders, in his speech referred to them as *ab kupari* "mad women," "insane women." He nonetheless commended them for their action, saying, "Now we are living in changed conditions, in new and different conditions," and that, just as the women had planted the flag on the battlefield, "we people" (*olyo yab*, an expression that includes both men and women) would be doing so in the future and "acting according to your different way of doing things."

Like Charles Dickens's use of the word *consequently* in my example of free indirect discourse above, Pokea's use of the word *kupari*, "mad" in this speech can only be understood as an instance of what Bakhtin called "heteroglossia," that is, as partially echoing the speech of another. But in this case the "other" implicitly includes Pokea himself, in an earlier incarnation in which he had thought and acted according to the older

way of doing things. Here, I would say, is another instance of the ethical imagination at work, acting within the new horizon that had been opened up by the women's bold act on the battlefield. And here in the use of free indirect discourse is another instance of the way in which the ethical is tied up with the power of language to enable multiple perspectives and to allow and even compel speakers to place their own in relation to others'—and indeed, in relation to their own, as shown by this example and illuminated by Hegel, Freud, Peirce, G. H. Mead, Vygotsky, and Bakhtin, all of whom have shown in their various ways how our interior psychic lives are constituted through conversations among introjected social voices. Though I cannot go into this matter here,<sup>9</sup> it is obviously of central relevance for the understanding of ethics as a dimension of everyday life. Suffice it to note for present purposes, as emphasized by Vygotsky (1986), Vološinov (1987), and others, that this “inner conversation,” and our human capacity to engage in it, are secondary products of the “outer” social one. It follows that the same is true of the relationship between “inner” ethical deliberation and its “outer” counterparts, including ethical action itself, all of these being intimately bound up with the nature of language.

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9. See, however, Rumsey (2003a) for some relevant considerations.