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Background

The field manuals were originally intended as working documents for internal use only. They were supplemented by verbal instructions and additional guidelines in many cases. If you have questions about using the materials, or comments on the viability in various field situations, feel free to get in touch with the authors.

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Reasoning in language

Gunter Senft

Project- Aims:

This project aims to investigate how speakers of various languages in indigenous cultures verbally reason about moral issues. The ways in which a solution for a moral problem is found, phrased and justified will be taken as the basis for researching reasoning processes that manifest themselves verbally in the speakers' arguments put forward to solve a number of moral problems which will be presented to them in the form of unfinished story plots or scenarios that ask for a solution. The plots chosen attempt to present common problems in human society and human behaviour. They should function to elicit moral discussion and/or moral arguments in groups of consultants of at least three persons.

The data collected in this way will provide information with respect to

- how people come up with a moral argument;
- how the argument is justified, what is considered grounds for moral reasoning;
- and what the argument reveals about cultural norms and values of this speech community.

Thus, the research interests within this project cover linguistic, pragmatic and anthropological issues.

These data should be used to investigate the linguistic means that the speakers use to verbally externalize their thoughts with respect to the moral problems with which they are confronted. Linguistic research questions that can be approached with these data range from semantic analyses of verbal expressions like logical connectives that speakers produce in putting forward their moral arguments, up to the higher-level discourse analytical question of how these arguments are structured, reformulated, revised and finally presented as a solution to the posed problem (if there is such a solution, of course). The latter point involves pragmatic processes in articulating a moral argument. Finally, the contents of these arguments will be revealing with respect to the cultural norms and values that are commonly held in the researched speech communities.

Method:

Field-researchers are asked to present the plots or scenarios listed at the end of this section to a group of at least two consultants, after having them instructed as follows:

"I would like you to listen to the following story (tale). Then I will ask you a question with respect to this story. I would like you to think about the story and then answer the question, telling me what you think about it".

Researchers should encourage their consultants to first discuss the problem presented in a story and then come up with a joint solution or with individual answers if they don't agree. The instruction given above is just a proposal; the actual wording of the instruction should of course follow the adequate and language-specific pragmatics of questions within the speech community under study.

The plots/scenarios are outlined below. They should be adequately translated by the field researchers in their respective field-languages. There is, of course, some flexibility with respect to the actual wording of the scenarios; however, field researchers have to make sure that their translations stick to the outlined plots as closely as possible. The field researcher may recognize one or the other plot as being borrowed from world literature; nevertheless, the aim was to minimize ethnocentric bias in these scenarios. As already mentioned, the scenarios attempt to present general problems that may arise in any human society. Some may be more fruitful prompts to moral discussion than others in the cultural context you are working in.

Plots/Scenarios:

1. Once upon a time there was an old man and an old woman. Once on their way to their garden/their field they heard a child crying. They found this child – it was a small baby-boy. The woman took him up, went back to her village and asked whether anyone knew anything about his mother. But she could not find the mother of this boy. Thus the old woman said that she will take the little boy and treat him like one of her own children, and her husband agreed to this. So the boy stayed with them, the old woman was like his mother, the old man was like his father, and they loved him like a child of their own. The boy grew up and worked for the old man and the old woman. He was a very good worker/gardener/hunter/fisher. One day an old woman came to their place and said: This young man is my son. I abandoned him a long time ago in the bush/forest/gardens/fields/desert because I had no food to feed him. There was a famine. I thought he might either die or people might find him and help him. I heard that you found the baby and now I want him to come with me to my village/place and work for me, because I am his real mother. Now, what are the young man, and the old woman and the old man who picked him up as a baby, going to do?

2. Once upon a time, long ago the people from the mountains (any location other than the local place) were always fighting with the people from the islands (the local place). The Highlanders were fierce people, but the Islanders were good people. Once there was a big war. The Highlanders (built canoes and) came to the Islands. The chief (etc.) of the Islanders was thinking very hard and came up with a plan for how they could chase away the Highlanders. He told the people that he himself knows how to win the war, and no one else should do anything on his or her own. He himself will chase away the Highlanders. He will kill any person who will act against this order - and all the people agreed to this. There was one man who heard what the chief had said and thought that it was good. He went to the garden (the bush, etc) to work. In the evening this man saw the canoes of the Highlanders coming close to where his garden was. The Highlanders landed there and slept. This man took the Highlanders' knives, clubs and spears. He then returned to his village, told what he had done and where the Highlanders were sleeping – and the chief and the village people fought them and chased the Highlanders away. This man had actually won the war – but he did not do what the chief had said. Now what is the chief going to do?

3A Once upon a time there was a man who did not care for his children, did not work in the garden, and always slept with other women coming to visit his village. What will his wife do?

3B Once upon a time there was a woman who did not care for her children, did not cook, did not work in the garden, and always slept with other men coming to visit her village. What will her husband do?

4 Once upon a time there was a rich man, but all the other people did not have any money whatsoever. Once the poor people from the village came to him and wanted to sell fish (or corn, yams, whatever) to him because they needed the money for a feast. The rich man told them that he would buy lobsters and pay five Kina (or whatever) for each lobster. The people went fishing and caught many lobsters, but when they wanted to sell them to the rich man, he said he would pay them only three Kina for one lobster. What will the people do now?

5 Once upon a time there was a woman who had given birth to many children already, and she was pregnant again. But she had no food. There was a famine. She gave birth to her child, but the child was very small and weak. She did not want the child because there was no food for all her children, and if this child would stay alive, all of them would greatly suffer from the famine – the woman, her husband, and all their other children. Thus she thought she might kill the newborn child. What do you think the woman will do now?

6 Once upon a time there was a chief who had two sons. One of them was a good man. He always did what his father and his mother told him to do. This good man was a good gardener (fisher, hunter etc). But his younger brother was a man with bad manners. He grew up but did not garden (work) for his father and his mother, he went to the Highlands (to another place) and worked there,

but he spent all his money on girls. He did not write letters or anything and he did not want to know about his mother, his father, and his elder brother. However, this man got very sick, he almost died, and he just had enough money to come back to his village. When he came back and stepped out of his canoe (truck, etc) his father and his mother were so happy that they killed two pigs, helped him to build a house and gave this bad son money, food, valuables and so on - because they were so happy that he had returned home. But what about his brother, the good man - what do you think he will think and say? And do you think it was good what the father and the mother did?

7 Once upon a time there was a big famine. There was no food, no sweet potatoes, no taro, no coconuts, no pigs (etc.). There was a man who went to another island (place). There he saw a ship (a truck etc). He went to it and saw that it was full of food. He was terribly hungry. He saw a stranger who looked like he was protecting the food. Then this man left (for a swim, a stroll), and no one guarded the ship (truck) full of food. The hungry man wanted to take some food because of the famine and because he was so hungry. He went to the ship (truck), took some food and ate it. Do you think what he did was good, or what?

8 Once upon a time there was a man and a woman who loved each other very much. The woman got pregnant and gave birth to a child, but the man said: I will not marry her, I am not the father of the child that she has borne. The woman was very sad and cried, she left this man, she left her village and went to the mountains (to another place). There she worked very hard for her child and for herself. The child grew up, he became a good man and earned much money, gave much to his mother and his mother now was a rich woman. They lived in the mountains. One day the woman read in the papers that there was a severe famine in her old village. Many children had already died and many more people would die if there was no help for them. The woman now went back to her old village and said: If the people will kill the man she loved a long time ago, the father of her child, then she will buy a lot of food, load it into a canoe (a truck) and bring it to the village so that all people have food to eat. Then there will be no hunger any more. What do you think the villagers will do?

Finally, create one (or more) culture-specific scenario of your own choosing, representing a moral dilemma based on the particularities of the local community. It may even be based on a real event. Moral discussions in response to this culturally-construed narrative will be used to compare with the moral discussions elicited by the cross-cultural scenarios given above.