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Ethics in pragmatics

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Abstract

This paper compiles a series of useful resources, which should act as pointers for decision-making processes for ethics in pragmatics. We show why ethical considerations are central to good academic practice, and key to protecting the interlocutors and informants whose practices we wish to study. In doing so, we advocate adopting an understanding of ethical-decision making as a process, and not the result of a single decision made at the outset of research (cf. e.g., Markham and Buchanan, 2012). As we delineate in this chapter, this approach is key, given that there are not always straightforward, easy solutions to ethical desiderata. To ensure that scholars can benefit from the ethical-decision making processes other scholars have undergone, we thus advocate that scholars include brief discussions of the ethical measures underlining the research presented in their work. This transparency would serve to encourage a conversation among scholars within and across research disciplines and for greater recognition of the importance and relevance of seeing ethics as a process.

Keywords: Ethics; Ethics as process; Informed consent; Privacy; Confidentiality

1. Introduction

A call for ethical considerations in linguistics emerges in many moments during research. However, it first begins when we consider working with data, since all data stems from individuals, who can potentially be influenced (positively and negatively) by the work we do. In an attempt to not cause our interlocutors harm – an intent which is at the heart of ethically sound research – we must be mindful of the complexity of the research process, and do our level best to reflect upon the best ways to work with data without causing harm to our interlocutors. During data collection, this typically includes

reflecting on questions of privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent; and scholars have to choose among the many different ways in which these can most suitably be guaranteed (anonymization/pseudonyms, blurring faces/voices, written or oral consent, etc.; see Adolphs et al., 2016). During the research process, parameters might shift as the data takes researchers in unexpected directions. With every new turn of one's research design, ethical considerations thus need to be re-addressed and re-assessed, so as to ensure they are suitable for the particular research and research subjects at hand. It seems a given that scholars in pragmatics are aware of the importance of such ethical considerations when developing research designs and researching language in use. In recent years, however, the team of editors of the *Journal of Pragmatics*¹ has discussed whether a particular

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contribution might need to be returned to the author for resubmission on grounds of lack of ethical consideration or lack of explanation of ethical consideration with respect to data collection. Given the fact that not every author has access to an institutional ethics review board or that teaching ethics is a given at all universities, we first tried to find information on Elsevier's webpage to refer scholars to. As it turns out, the publisher's official guidelines for journals address "Ethics in publishing" and "Ethical guidelines for journal publication". These guidelines deal with issues such as the "authorship of the paper", "originality and plagiarism", "data access and retention" (disclosure of sources), "multiple, redundant or concurrent publication", "acknowledgement of sources", "disclosure and conflicts of interest", reporting "fundamental errors in published works", as well as general "reporting standards" (<https://www.elsevier.com/authors/journal-authors/policies-andethics>). In other words, while important, the guidelines are general, primarily focus on good academic practices regarding the writing and publishing process, and are valid for all publication outlets rather than those specializing in linguistics as a discipline.

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There are only two points that deal with data collection: "Hazards and human or animal subjects" and "Use of patient images or case details" (<https://www.elsevier.com/authors/journal-authors/policies-and-ethics>). This focus on biomedical ethics procedures is of course not surprising. Ethical procedures in research were first systematically developed in the field of medicine; therefore, this field has the most implemented, institutionalized and legalized ethics guidelines globally. However, for the linguist who is trying to seek guidance regarding his/her own ethical procedure, or potential pathways to ethical conduct, the publisher's website is currently of little practical use.²

Against this backdrop, this paper pursues several aims: We wish to raise awareness of issues pertaining to ethics in pragmatics, and to initiate a discussion of ethics as a process. In the course of doing so, we will also point readers to guidelines on ethics, which have

¹ At the time of writing, the first author of this paper was part of this editorial team. She and the second author wanted to write this paper as they have also faced such concerns in their own and students' work over many years.

² It seems clear that a publisher like Elsevier cannot customize guidelines for each of its individual journals, which pertain to many different research fields, nor keep up with developments in theories and methodologies concerning ethics.

already been established in linguistics and which can function as useful resources for decision processes. Due to space constraints, we will not give an entire overview of the field or provide specific guidelines. However, Section 3 and the reference section of this paper, include mention of various sources we have drawn on and deem particularly useful for research in pragmatics. In delineating these resources in our paper, our aim is to highlight how and why ethical considerations are a central part of sound academic practice. While such ethical considerations may at times be perceived as hindering or at least challenging with respect to one's research goals, there are also clear benefits. The prime benefit is, of course, obtaining interesting data without causing harm to the people who have facilitated its collection, such that we can engage in discussion of relevance both within and potentially also outside of our field, and academia in general. Furthermore, if a whole body of scholars obtain data by adhering to ethical protocol, it is likely that this will also have positive effects on future data collection in that it may create trust in the community which is being researched and which may be more likely to participate in future research (Adolphs et al., 2016: 4).³ The need to discuss ethics also grows as ethical issues become important to publishing (with journals paying more attention to ethics) and research grant applications (with funding bodies being more mindful of the need for ethical sound research within the humanities and social sciences). The points raised in this paper are thus not only of concern to the *Journal of Pragmatics* but to the wider linguistics research community.

As we delineate in this paper, whilst ethics are key, dealing with ethical questions is a challenging process, as there are seldom straightforward, easy solutions. For this reason, we advocate considering ethical-decision making a process, and not the result of a single decision made at the outset of the research (e.g., Markham and Buchanan, 2012). Against this backdrop, we argue that data sections in papers should explicitly (even if briefly) discuss the ethical measures taken, so that we can learn from each other. This transparency would encourage a conversation among scholars within and across research disciplines.

With these aims in mind, this paper first turns to delineate information on ethics basics (section 2), and ethics in linguistics course books, manifestos and guidelines (section 3). These serve as the backdrop to our discussion of ethics as process (section 4), and the examination of a series of examples of ethical dilemmas (section 5). Our aim thereby is to offer suggestions for relevant literature that could help scholars with their ethical decisions while conducting research.

2. Ethical basics

Since linguists deal with language and language is inherently social, the question of whether a particular linguistic data set can be collected and used for research is a

³ As the online research code book of the VU Medical Centre Amsterdam (2016: section 3) puts it, "respect for subjects involved in research is essential if the trust and cooperation of potential participants is to be secured for the future." This point is also valid for research in the humanities and social sciences.

pertinent one. The classic pillars of ethics⁴ include “the fundamental rights of human dignity, autonomy, protection, safety, maximization of benefits and minimization of harms, or, in the most recent accepted phrasing, respect for persons, justice, and beneficence” (Markham and Buchanan, 2012: 4). Of these, as stated above, the most overarching is the minimization of harm, which is at the cornerstone of ethical conduct and decision-making processes. These pillars feed into both the scholars’ reflection upon how they should best proceed given their aims, research questions, epistemology, etc. and into how they write up proposals which are submitted to institutional review boards. As outlined by Schneider (2018: 74–75), the central tenants of welfare, autonomy and privacy can, in line with Guillemin and Gillam (2004) and Kubanyiova (2008),

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be conceptualized as macroethical principles, i.e. general principles standardly required by review boards and ethics committees at universities and in other institutions. Microethics, by contrast, concerns the more particular requirements in the specific context of an investigation [...]. (Schneider, 2018: 74–75)

When looking at linguistic data with these concepts in mind, we can indeed state that there are different degrees of relevance involved. Taking as a starting point the distinction among armchair, laboratory and field methods (for an overview, see Jucker, 2009) or intuition, observation and experimentation (Schneider, 2018: 49), we can see that different ethical deliberations become prominent when considering the data collection process. While all scholars need to engage in ethical conduct, an armchair linguist, who works with invented examples in theoretical linguistics to illustrate a syntactic grammar point, is less likely to be in danger of harming anyone with an example than a scholar who works with naturally occurring data.

For scholars working with a laboratory approach, which might include the use of questionnaires, interviews and linguistic experiments, the need to obtain consent from prospective informants is evident. Here, ethical considerations are usually both part of the research design and made explicit in reference material and teaching. It will thus not come as a surprise that there are many valuable publications which can help scholars in the ethical decision-making processes. For example, research on first and second language acquisition often involves minors: In these cases, the parents need to give consent for the research to take place, and if the research takes place at school, the teacher and school board, too, depending on the laws of the respective country (see Mann, 2018).⁵

Turning to fieldwork in the sense of collecting naturally occurring data, data collection becomes quite diverse, as both offline and online ethnographies encompass a range of

⁴ Markham and Buchanan (2012) share that “[p]rinciples of research ethics and ethical treatment of persons are codified in a number of policies and accepted documents, such as the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the Nuremberg Code, the Declaration of Helsinki, and the Belmont Report.”

⁵ As Schneider (2018: 76) points out, next to ethical considerations there are also legal considerations which can differ from country to country. It can sometimes be quite challenging to separate ethical from legal considerations, or to decide what types of legal considerations need to be considered as part of the ethical-decision making process. This is particularly challenging when dealing with mobile data; data where participants move or where it is neither possible nor sensible to map participants onto particular times and spaces.

methods, including the writing of fieldnotes, and the collection of images, and screen, audio, or video data. While the ideal of asking for prior consent when using data is sometimes straightforward (for example, when obtaining consent for a recording in a workplace where fieldwork takes place), in other cases the situation is murkier (for example, when bystanders are involved, when people interact anonymously, or when fieldwork encompasses a period of [online or offline] observation ‘prior to’ data collection, raising questions about what counts as data and when the data collection process starts). Once we turn to situations online (e.g., D’Arcy and Young, 2012) or offline (Rampton, 2009) where the boundaries of communities are being renegotiated, knowing whose language we are dealing with becomes even more of a challenge (see also the comments on Internet research in section 3). Even in these cases, however, scholars will have to ask themselves how the data can be used in an ethical way.

In order to avoid the observer’s paradox in face-to-face interaction, it might seem desirable to ask for retrospective consent. However, as Schneider (2018: 77) points out, this practice is likely to be considered unethical by most scholars and informants, whilst also possibly constituting a criminal offence. He gives the example of Germany where surreptitious recording is prohibited by law. At the same time, there are studies in linguistics which have made use of surreptitious recording in the past (e.g. the London-Lund Corpus partly contains transcripts of surreptitiously recorded data, a practice which was not frowned upon to the same degree in the past: Svartvik, 1990). When looking for best practice examples, we should therefore be critical of past practices and consider the current legal and ethical contexts. A similar connection between legal and ethical concerns can be observed with respect to copyright. While it might be tempting to add entire books, manifestos, blogs, etc. to a digital corpus of naturally-occurring data, questions concerning copyright as well as consent need to be addressed in one’s research design. In general, it needs to be stated that not every country has legalized ethics guidelines for the humanities and social sciences. In countries where legalized ethics guidelines exist, the first step for researchers should be to double check whether their university has a reviewing board and follow their guidelines. In countries where no legalized ethics guidelines exist, scholars should still take general ethics principles into account and also head other existing, legal boundaries (such as privacy protection, copyright, or data storage, etc.) (see also note 1).

3. Ethics in linguistics course books, manifestos and guidelines

As mentioned above, while all linguists need to consider ethics (see also Section 4 below), we propose that the centrality of human subjects to laboratory and fieldwork methods means scholars working with such approaches should explicitly include ethical deliberation in their data collection research design. Indeed, methodology course books typically comment on ethics, albeit to varying degrees. As argued by Dörnyei (2007):

We have to address this issue [of ethical stakes], particularly because at the heart of the matter lies a basic tension: on the one hand, with our researcher hat on, we cannot deny the fact that ethical issues are often a hindrance to our investigation and in our politically correct age ethical questions can get so out of proportion that it can become virtually impossible to do research in certain contexts. On the other hand, as human beings with moral principles, we cannot deny either that there is more to life than research and if there is a possibility for a clash between the researcher's and the participant's interests, it is clear where the priorities should lie. (Dörnyei, 2007: 64)

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For Dörnyei (2007: 66), it is thus “the moral character of the researcher” which lies “at the heart of research ethics” (see also De Costa, 2016b: 3, on how ethics and morality are intertwined). This strong statement is one we also endorse, since we, too, believe that ethical considerations are the responsibility of scholars. Ethical considerations, in this sense, prompt for researcher reflexivity. At the same time, as we have argued above, there are typically no easy or straightforward answers to ethical questions; this fact is discussed under the labels of “ethical continuum” (De Costa, 2016b: 3), “ethics as process” (Markham and Buchanan, 2012: 5) and “microethics” (Schneider, 2018; and section 2 above).

Since research in pragmatics is by definition interested in language in use, scholars in this field are encouraged to get insights from the manifold guidelines, manifestos, and descriptions and suggestions in methodological textbooks. Given the lively ethical discussions in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, scholars working within pragmatics may also find it useful to tap into related fields in an attempt to enrich their understandings of ethical-decision making. Two recent edited collections bear mentioning in this regard: De Costa's (2016a) *Ethics in Applied Linguistic Research* and Mallinson et al.'s (2018) *Data Collection in Sociolinguistics: Methods and Applications*. In De Costa (2016a, b), the reader finds 12 chapters which are grouped into four parts, each dealing with core considerations relevant to sound ethical-decision making. These include “laying the groundwork”, “applying ethics to different linguistic communities”, “ethics, voice and multilingualism” and “ethics and the media”. In Mallinson et al. (2018), we find a number of chapters that deal explicitly with ethics from a range of perspectives, and with regards to different types of data. These include Besnier on “Responsibility to research participants in representation”; Ehrlich (2018) on “Ethical dilemmas in the use of public documents”; Mann on “Conducting research with vulnerable populations”; Sadler on “Real ethical issues in virtual world research”; Trechter (2018) on “Social ethics for sociolinguistics” and Zimman (2018) on “Working with transgender communities”. In addition, Schneider's (2018) chapter on “Methods and ethics of data collection” in the handbook *Methods in Pragmatics* also provides a valuable entry point.

Further valuable resources are provided by various academic societies. The Linguistics Society of America (Bowern et al., 2009), for example, provides a brief document on ethics with guiding principles and publishes results from their ethics committee blog. A recently updated, useful document is also provided by The British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL; Adolphs et al., 2016). This document outlines “recommendations on

good practice in Applied Linguistics”, via discussion of “responsibilities” and “relationships”, “informants: relationships and responsibilities”, “responsibilities to colleagues”, “responsibilities to students”, “responsibilities to applied linguistics”, “relationships with sponsors”, “relationships with institutions” and “responsibilities to the public”. Each section ends with guiding questions that help scholars to come to a meaningful decision and a list of further reading. (Such questions provide scholars with a valuable entry into a process approach to ethics; see Section 3 below.) The American Association for Applied Linguistics (De Costa et al., no year) similarly provides advisory guidelines and is based on the BAAL document.

Since the Internet poses numerous new challenges for scholars with respect to ethical decisions concerning data and protection of informants as well as related copyright issues, researching interaction in this context has caused new debates on ethics and hence also a flurry of publications. This is mainly because of concerns about anonymity and consent, as well as privacy and vulnerability. Recent helpful advisory guidelines have been published by the Association of Internet researchers (AoIR; Ess et al., 2002) and Markham and Buchanan (2012). There are also a number of useful collections and articles on ethics which deal with various Internet research contexts. These include

- Bolander and Locher (2014) who provide an overview of central concerns relating to ethics in CMC contexts (for example as pertaining to the use of big data);
- Buchanan (2004) who delineates a series of “issues” and “controversies” in his *Readings in Virtual Research Ethics: Issues and Controversies*;
- Buchanan and Williams (2010) who address psychological research on the internet;
- D'Arcy and Young (2012) whose work explores ethics and social network sites;
- Eysenbach and Till (2001) who specifically focus on ethics in qualitative Internet research;
- Markham et al.'s (2018: 1) special issue which explores ethics in connection with big data, particularly concerning implications for the human subject in big data research;
- Page et al. (2014) who encompass discussions of ethics in their student guide for research on language and social media;
- Rüdiger and Dayter (2017) who address ethical concerns via the example of online Pick Up Artists;
- Sadler (2018) whose ethical reflections stem from research on virtual worlds;
- Tagg et al. (2017) who focus on ethics in online and offline digital ethnography; and
- Webb et al. (2017) who explore the challenge of dealing ethically with Twitter data and point to contradictions and disagreement amongst academics, as well as legal contradictions.

In considering the range of different research aims, and types of approaches and data scholars of pragmatics work with, there is clearly “no simple ethical guideline” which “applies to all situations”, such that scholars “must consider carefully questions of ethics broadly defined, taking into account not only issues of consent, but also power, scale,

representation, subjectivity, and positionality” (Besnier, 2018: 47). We believe the sources quoted above can provide scholars with assistance in considering this wide range of questions.

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4. Ethics as process

Importantly, and as underscored at various points throughout this paper, ethical issues do not only concern the data collection process. As Markham and Buchanan (2012: 5) argue, “[e]thical issues may arise and need to be addressed during all steps of the research process, from planning to publication and dissemination”. This ultimately means that ethics is a process rather than something that can or should be ticked off at some (early) stage during one’s research.⁶ Keeping this in mind, Markham and Buchanan (2012: 5, emphasis added), argue that they “advocate *guidelines* rather than a code of practice so that ethical research can remain flexible, be responsive to diverse contexts, and be adaptable to continually changing technologies”. Given the fact that ethical-decision making processes involve numerous actors – including informants, colleagues, students, sponsors, institutions and the public – this “process approach” (Markham and Buchanan, 2012: 5) cannot be highlighted enough.

This stance is also advocated in De Costa’s (2016b: 5) edited collection on *Ethics in Applied Linguistic Research*. Here, De Costa argues for an interdisciplinary and reflexive approach to ethics. What is particularly noteworthy is his idea to draw on “methodological rich points” (Agar, 1996; Hornberger, 2006) with respect to ethics, i.e. moments “before, during, and after data collection” (De Costa, 2016b: 5) where ethics re-emerge as an issue. To illustrate the implications of this approach, the authors in his collection were asked to reflect on such rich points: a prompt which has resulted in highly informative chapters that provide a glimpse into ethical research conduct as a process. Whilst ethics review boards might call for an *a priori* one-off decision to be made at the beginning of the research process, in line with our understanding of ethics outlined in this paper, it is key that scholars continue to be reflexive about their research, and consider ethical challenges and desiderata throughout the process of their research. This is also warranted given the need to be open towards the fluctuating directionality of research, as we do not always know, even when adopting methods which prompt for clear research questions at the outset, where our research will take us.

5. Ethics dilemmas: some examples

Since decisions about ethical conduct involve deliberation, vis-à-vis the various actors involved and one’s self as a researcher, many scholars speak of “ethical dilemmas”. For

⁶ As one of the reviewers points out, scholars who submit their project to the screening of an institutional ethics review board, need to notify the board if reflection leads to changes in the research protocol so that the board can approve said changes.

example, Markham and Buchanan (2012) conceptualize the decision-making process as a dilemma in its own right, given that the different guidelines might contradict each other:

It becomes difficult to make judgments as to which set(s) to apply, especially when one set conflicts with another in some way. This forces the researcher to determine which is more relevant in a given context or at particular junctures during the course of the study [...]. Multiple judgements are possible, and ambiguity and uncertainty are part of the process. (Markham and Buchanan, 2012: 5)

Furthermore, as outlined in research based on ethnographic fieldwork, there is no guarantee that there will be consistency between what a scholar might deem standard ethical procedure based on his/her own background and the procedures put forward in ethical guidelines and by review boards and what is deemed meaningful by one's interlocutors (e.g., a salient example here is the emphasis on obtaining written consent in methodology courses and ethical guidelines which are deemed unsuitable for use in settings where written forms are mistrusted; Bowern, 2015). Dilemmas might also be related to specific contexts of research, like, for instance, in Dörnyei's (2007: 64–66) research in school contexts, where ethical dilemmas appear in connection with the danger of misuse of information on subjects and data (e.g. poor test results that might subsequently be linked to subjects).

In what follows, we look more closely at a couple of ethical dilemmas, since these shed light on the range of possible ethical challenges and researcher responses. Rüdiger and Dayter (2017: 251), for instance, explore ethical dilemmas in their research on the discourse of Pick Up Artists, predominantly men in their data, who exchange experiences online on how to use "manipulative strategies to select, pursue, isolate and sexually conquer women". The authors show how reflections about their own roles as researchers and their decisions with respect to the study of a practice that is morally dubious, and whose participants are hence equally dubious on moral grounds, led to continuous discussion and reflection. Their text is an insightful example of what Markham and Buchanan (2012: 5) mean when they talk about ambiguity as related to ethics as a process; whilst also engaging with the overlap between ethics and morality discussed in Section 3 above.

A recent special issue in the *Journal of Politeness Research* (2018, volume 14) also offers insights into ethical-decision making as a process, in this instance involving deliberation. Presenting five articles that all look at the same data set from different perspectives, it underscores the fact that there are typically multiple solutions to ethical dilemmas. The data involves the broadcast screening of a young woman's routine bail hearing with a judge in Florida, and online discussions about this episode. The young woman in question offended the judge with her behavior. Ethical issues came up since the woman's name is revealed in the broadcast. In thus becoming part of the public domain, anonymization of the woman as a typical ethical step might become meaningless (i.e., a pro forma act rather than a meaningful decision). On

the other hand, one could also argue that the woman in question has the right that her offence be forgotten at some stage; repetition of her name in the media and in scholarship would, from this vantage point, serve to cement her identity as a perpetrator. Against this backdrop, the authors of the special issue engage in numerous discussions on how to handle the data in an ethical way, and they share their decisions in a prologue in which the data is introduced. For example, they choose to reveal the name of the young woman on the basis of the argument that the data belongs to the public domain but “refer to the interactants by their interactional roles as judge and defendant and not by their identities in the transcript” (Price and Wilson, 2018: 3).

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Ethical dilemmas, as the above examples show, often arise since there are multiple possible interpretations of actions and the contexts framing them. This becomes evident in Hudson and Bruckman’s (2002) research on Internet Relay Chat Français. Based on the finding that foreign language learning online discussions differ from classroom discussions (held in a language lab environment), the authors wanted students to converse with native speakers who were already on IRC. Whilst the act of obtaining consent from their students was deemed straightforward, the research highlighted the ethical dilemma of whether consent was needed from the students’ interactional partners. This dilemma centered around the question of whether these interlocutors constituted “research subjects” in their own right. As outlined by Hudson and Brackman (2002: 117), “[w]ere they research subjects or not? We were not studying them in particular, but were recording their conversations with our students and analyzing their words. Did we need their consent?” Whilst the public nature of the data suggested that consent might not be needed, the ephemeral nature of the conversations meant social actors (i.e., the students’ interactional partners) could reasonably expect not to be recorded, a factor which suggested that consent might be needed after all. The Institutional Review Board approved a protocol in which written consent was obtained from students. For the students’ interactional partners, no consent was sought – they were instead notified of the study and given the possibility to opt out. However, this approach failed. The interactional partners reacted with anger and hostility, suggesting they felt the researchers should have asked for their consent. Their reaction led the researchers to rethink the relationship between the accessibility of the data and its ephemerality. Foregrounding the importance of reasonable expectation, the authors concluded that it was important to seek consent from all participants when dealing with ephemeral data, and they ended up creating their own Internet Relay Chat with a message informing interlocutors about the study upon logging in. This example not only illustrates the repercussions stemming from the fact that different parameters (social, contextual and technological) might suggest different ethically-sound measures, but also the need to conceptualize ethics as a process. Despite receiving permissions from the International Review Board to proceed in the manner outlined above, the authors’ experiences with the data and subsequent reflection led them to make different ethical choices in the course of their study.

6. Conclusions

Our aim in this brief paper to the *Quo Vadis* special issue is to alert scholars to the benefits of sharing how ethical considerations enter and shape their research in pragmatics, to initiate a discussion of ethics as a process and to point readers to established guidelines on ethics. We feel this is important given that ethical decisions are seldom easy, straightforward or unambiguous. Considering ethics as a process (De Costa, 2016b: 5; Copland and Creese, 2016; Markham and Buchanan, 2012), however, helps as a guiding principle when designing research methodologies. In Markham and Buchanan's (2012) words,

Ethical decision-making is a deliberative process, and researchers should consult as many people and resources as possible in this process, including fellow researchers, people participating in or familiar with contexts/sites being studied, research review boards, ethics guidelines, published scholarship (within one's discipline but also in other disciplines), and, where applicable, legal precedent. (Markham and Buchanan, 2012: 5)

We hope that it will become common practice in articles published in the *Journal of Pragmatics* to not only declare that ethical considerations were taken into account but to also explain *how* they were applied throughout the research process. For example, all scholars, whether they systematically undergo an ethics board screening or not, should share their application of ethical principles to their research to encourage ethics-related conversation. We are not suggesting that this sharing needs to be detailed, such that scholars feel pressure to explain each and every single decision and thought; we argue that the goal instead is for readers to be (a) assured that the research is based on ethically-sound conduct and (b) to enhance the likelihood that readers can ideally learn from best practices.

At the same time, we need to reiterate that 'best practice' in the past may not be 'best practice' today – the past practice of surreptitious recordings being a case in point. Engaging with ethical considerations thus always means engaging with the situation at hand, in an endeavor to prioritize informants' rights and needs, whilst also facilitating scholarship in an attempt to drive a field forward. This means scholars need to take macroethical principles into account whilst also being sensitive towards the varied and sometimes contradictory realities of microethics (Schneider, 2018: 74–75). The result of this process will not necessarily be agreement. Indeed, as exemplified in Webb et al. (2017), there may even be disagreement between scholars and legal contradictions may emerge, too. Yet, by engaging in discussion about the manifold cultural and political complexity of ethical considerations, scholars working in pragmatics can learn from each other. As we argue in this brief article, this practice of learning can best be facilitated if we take a process approach to ethics, as this is defined by the need for discussion and sensitivity towards such complexity at all stages of the research process.



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