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Enlanguaged emotions: a pragmatist-inspired proposal

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we propose applying the view of human experience as enlanguaged to the field of emotions and present the hypothesis of "enlanguaged emotions" as a challenging research hypothesis. To support this proposal, we explore the affinity between American Pragmatism and modern research on the relationship between, firstly, language and experience, particularly the so-called Grounded Language Approach, and secondly, language and emotions, especially the so-called Theory of Constructed Emotions. In the first part of the paper, we embrace the idea that human experience and language are not fundamentally separate realms: Human experience is enlanguaged, ontogenetically and phylogenetically. Language is an integral part of human experience and is not primarily experienced *per se*, as an independent syntactic or semantic system. Rather, it is strictly interwoven in human cognition, emotivity and joint action. Conversely, this 'integrated view' suggests that human experience, involving perception, cognition and emotion, is significantly configured through language. In the second part of the paper, we suggest extending the Pragmatists' assertion that bodily and facial gestures are an integral part of emotional wholes to include linguistic gestures. These are not merely exterior vehicles for expressing internal states that exist in the mind or brain independently of human practices and interactions with a complex environment. More precisely, we argue that linguistic gestures – not only words, but more broadly linguistic habits, i.e. relatively stable ways of interacting and doing things through speech – contribute to the very constitution of human emotions, given the peculiarly enlanguaged experience and environment characterizing our species.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we propose applying the view of human experience as enlanguaged to the field of emotions and present the hypothesis of "enlanguaged emotions" as a challenging research hypothesis. We advance this claim by exploring the affinity between American Pragmatism and modern research on the relationship between language and experience. To support our approach to the entanglement of emotions and language, we will develop our proposal in two steps. The first step focuses on the transition from a Grounded Language approach to the very idea of enlanguaged experience. The second introduces the notion of human emotions as enlanguaged. The first part of the paper provides a schematic – yet, we hope, useful –

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mapping of the main trends in contemporary research on the relationships between experience and language, individuating four primary approaches (§ 2). After presenting an original interpretation of some of the Pragmatists' insights on the topic (§ 3), we will examine the main tenets of the human "enlanguaged experience" theory, which was developed by Dreon (2022, 2024) by radicalizing some ideas found in John Dewey, George Herbert Mead and Frank Lorimer (§ 4). In summary, the issue we address in this first part is as follows: the application of so-called Grounded Cognition to linguistics is pivotal in overcoming a quasi-autonomous view of language as a self-sustaining system, as it supports instead a view of language as grounded in strongly embodied cognition, as embedded in a socio-cultural environment, and enacted in shared practices. However, when considering the reverse direction – the transformative effects of language on experience – some linguists sympathize with the idea of linguistic relativity (the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis), though most prefer to avoid this difficult issue. By adopting a pragmatist approach, we embrace the claim that human experience and language are not two fundamentally separate realms, insofar as human experience is enlanguaged, ontogenetically and phylogenetically. Language is an integral part of human experience and is not primarily experienced *per se*, as an independent syntactic or semantic system. Rather, it is strictly interwoven in human cognition, emotivity and joint action. Conversely, this 'integrated view' suggests that human experience, involving perception, cognition and emotion, is significantly configured through language.

The second part of the paper begins with a new overview of the main positions in the debate on the relationship between emotions and language (§ 5), paralleling the first picture presented in §2. After considering the Pragmatists' (especially William James, John Dewey, and George Mead) original criticism of the view that bodily and verbal gestures are mere expressions of emotions (§ 6), we will suggest adopting an enlanguaged approach to human emotions (§ 7). In short, we suggest extending the pragmatists' claim that bodily and facial gestures are an integral part of emotional wholes to include linguistic gestures. Both the former and the latter are not mere exterior vehicles for expressing internal states; rather, they contribute to the constitution of human emotions, given the peculiarly enlanguaged experience and environment characterizing our species. The distinction between the different components of an emotion – deep bodily changes, outward movements of the face and the body, felt experience and forms of proto-evaluation – are secondary and concern the point of view of an observer and a reflective, meta-level experiential approach. We conclude by considering how our speculative hypothesis converges with the empirical evidence that supports contemporary research on constructed emotions. This highlights a couple of specific points that characterize our proposal: a clear third option outside the dichotomy between naturalism and culturalism in emotion sciences and a behavioral or experiential approach to language.

2. Language and experience: recent research

Contemporary research on the relationship between experience and language is very complex, intertwining transdisciplinary contributions from a range of fields – including linguistics, neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, infant psychology and theories of social action – within more or less explicit conceptual frameworks. In what follows, we propose identifying four basic positions on the relationship between experience and language, as a useful tool for navigating the more recent literature on the topic: 1. Autonomist position: Language and experience each possess their own independent structure; 2. Experience impacts language; 3. Language filters experience; 4. Language and experience are strongly intertwined.

As illustrated in the following short overview, each of the four positions is represented by a family of theories and frameworks across a range of disciplines, from philosophy and linguistics to the psychological and social sciences. These positions are not absolute; they come in weaker and stronger versions, and one position does not necessarily exclude another. In particular, positions 2 and 3 can coexist without necessarily turning into position 4. In the present Section 2, we describe the four positions in more detail. Later in this article, Section 5 focuses on one dimension of the experiential pole – emotion – and asks how the language-emotion relationship is viewed in the perspective of each of the four positions.

1. The autonomist position

The first position is found in linguistic structuralism, generative grammar and Fodor's philosophical-psychological modular theory of mind (1975). According to this perspective, language and experience are independent dimensions with their own internal structures and dynamics. Information exchange between the two dimensions does take place via an 'interface'. For example, a thought is transformed into language, and an emotion must be conceptualized before it can be talked about. However, these 'transfers' leave the internal organization of each dimension – language, thought and emotion, also referred to as 'modules' – unaffected.

2. Language is grounded in experience

Position 2 is strongly represented by Cognitive Linguistics. Features and processes of cognition, such as (prototypical) categorization, analogy, construal, blending and figure-ground distinction, play a role in the internal organization of language and its structures and meanings. The work of Langacker, Talmy, Lakoff and Johnson in the 1980s laid the foundation

for this school of thought. Since then, Cognitive Linguistics has grown into a robust framework within linguistics. For a recent example of this line of thinking, see Schmid (2020: 221), who writes (italics added): "Linking entrenchment and embodiment, we are at the hypothesis that *linguistic knowledge that is* supported *by bodily experience* is more likely to become entrenched, easier to entrench, and more resistant to decay caused by lack of rehearsal."

In addition to cognition and the body, other dimensions play a role in linguistic thinking about grounding language structure. In functional theories of language – see, for example, Dik (1997) – the impact of communicative functions on language structure is the focus of research. Subjectivity and intersubjectivity are additional grounding dimensions that are increasingly incorporated into linguistic theory.

In one version, this position resembles position 1: Once grounded in cognition and other dimensions, language establishes its own position and develops further, with its own dynamics. In another version, the grounding of language is permanently there: new experiences feed one's language – not only the lexicon, but also its structural features.

3. Language filters experience

It is often said that we know the world through the lens of our language. We don't know the world 'an sich'; we only know and experience it through the categories our language provides. This position is classically expressed in the thesis of Linguistic Relativity, also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

The idea of Linguistic Relativity has a long history, with its ups and downs. In the era when generative grammar – with its focus on universal grammar – dominated the field, linguistic relativity fell out of favor. However, in recent years, the thesis has been taken seriously again. We will illustrate this with some references and quotes. Pederson (2007) already argued that Cognitive Linguistics, with its focus on the grounding of language, does not exclude the position that language, in its turn, has a filtering effect on cognition, perhaps to varying degrees, cf. Pederson (2007: 1036): "One must also wonder whether certain linguistic construals more readily have influences beyond language than others. For example, is spatial categorization more likely to be influenced by language than color categorization is, or vice versa? If some domains are more linguistically sensitive, what do these domains have in common?"

An interesting and well-researched example of relativity is the role of language in color perception. If a language distinguishes between light and dark blue (Russian, for example), does this mean that the color perception of speakers of that language really differs from the color perception of speakers of a language which lacks that distinction? Kapelle and Flecken (2025) provide an excellent overview of this line of research. Their main claim is that the impact is not absolute and depends on the (experimental) task and context. They conclude (p. 23): "[L]inguistic influences on perception are intricately linked to the cognitive demands of the task. The implicit encouragement of language use, driven by participants' expectations for upcoming trials, is pivotal for linguistic effects on colour perception. For instance, tasks with predictable demands that encourages fast processing of stimuli may consistently induce language use and consequent effects." The same point is made by Christiansen and Chater (2022: 214-215): "Our set of linguistic tools doesn't limit what we can express; but it does affect what is easy to express and what can only be expressed with difficulty. Language shapes which thoughts are natural, but not which thoughts are possible."

In the context of their Motivation and Sedimentation Model (MSM), Blomberg and Zlatev (2021: 35) subscribe the relativity thesis, albeit rather tentatively (italics added): "[W]e propose that a synthetic ontology of language as an experientially grounded semiotic system for meaning making in actual social contexts *allows for the possibility for language to influence thought*, though in different ways." This tendency to separate language and experience, at least in certain stages and contexts, can also be seen in a more recent publication based on the MSM model, cf. Oakley and Zlatev (2024: 8): "Importantly, the embodied level of meaning is both pre-linguistic and pre-signitive (i.e., not based on sign use), engulfed in the richness of what Merleau-Ponty called 'the visible': processes of Gestalt perception and motility, bodily interactions with things, empathetic direct perception of other persons."

4. Language and experience are integrated

Notions such as 'grounding' (position 2) and 'filtering' (position 3) imply distinction: Language is either grounded in experience or plays a filtering role in how we experience 'reality'. In contrast, the position we are exploring here (position 4) views the two dimensions as strongly integrated. When you experience something, the associated words and phrases come to mind along with the experience. Conversely, when you use language, the corresponding experience is also activated.

The notion of 'enlanguaged experience' (cf. Dreon 2022, 2024) succinctly summarizes the position at stake here: language plays an integrated role in human experience. Language-free experience is difficult to find. According to this perspective, the research task is not to determine how the different dimensions impact each other, but rather, to model their fundamental 'entanglement'. Thus, instead of enlanguaged experience, we could also use the label 'en-experienced language'. The enlanguaged experience position is a radical one, located at the integrative pole of a spectrum leading from distinction to integration, as we will explain in Section 4.

In recent decades, various theoretical perspectives have explored how such an integrated view should be modelled. Although the degree of proposed integration varies among these views, the integrative attitude remains consistent, forming the basis for the following lines of thinking and research.

Kemmerer (2023) combines linguistic relativity with grounded cognition. His argument for the necessity of this combination is as follows: Premise 1: Different languages provide their speakers with different conventionalized conceptual systems; Premise 2: The conceptual system of a given language influences how its speakers think during nonlinguistic tasks. Conclusion: Therefore, speakers of different languages often think differently during nonlinguistic tasks. Note that Kemmerer's position is not absolute or dogmatic, cf. Kemmerer (2023: 628–629): "Because the claim is not that language always determines cognition, but rather that it often influences cognition, one should expect to find inconsistent effects that are modulated by many factors, and if one looks back over the last 70 years or so of research on this topic, that is pretty much what one sees."

Note that in Kemmerer's Grounded Cognition Model (GCM), language itself is part of the ground, cf. Kemmerer (2023: 617): "[T]he concrete features of word meanings are not merely stored within sensory/motor brain systems, but are represented there in ways that are, to a nontrivial degree, language-specific." This means that language makes sensorimotor brain systems become 'variable' and thus provides a variable ground for experience.

One year before Kemmerer's target article, Dove's, 2022 book sought to rethink grounded cognition theory in the direction under consideration here, cf. Dove (2022: 98): "A concept will not only be represented on a given occasion by multimodal simulations associated with (…) its referents, but also by multimodal simulations and action schemas associated with talking or listening to talk about them—that is, experiences of words, phrases, and conversations. The neurologically realized language system is an important subcomponent of a flexible, multimodal, and multilevel conceptual system."

Both Dove (2022) and Kemmerer (2023) belong to a family of authors and frameworks that seek an integrative approach. Among others, we encounter DST (Distributed Language Theory) and DST (Dynamical System Theory), as well enactivist theories, as the following short summaries show.

Distributed Language Theory (Cowley, ed. 2011) is one of these theories, cf. Cowley (2019: 468): "Languaging permeates attending, perceiving, acting, and feeling as experience is co-constructed and practiced. (…) [L]anguaging has more in common with Dewey's (1971b) action–perception cycles or, as in James (1983), a meshing of core and fringe experience." Rasmus Gahrn-Rasmussen has edited a rich journal issue on enlanguaged practices and contributed a paper on enlanguaged practice applied to human normativity (Gahrn-Andersen, 2024), practices (Cowley, 2019) and human sociality (Raimondi, 2019). Then there is Cognitive Ecolinguistics (cf. Steffensen, 2024: 26), which shares similarities with "Gibsonian ecological linguistics (…) enactivist accounts of language (…) and a distributed language perspective."

Dynamical Systems Theory (DST, cf. Rodríguez Jordá and Di Paolo, 2025) also belongs here. The following quotes from Rodríguez Jordá and Di Paolo (2025: 8-11) illustrate their position: "[L]anguage is regarded as having a global impact on human experience, both in its cognitive and affective aspects, in such a way that it reconfigures prior forms of experience and makes new ones possible. (…) If we adopt this perspective, language and the diverse cognitive skills it supports can be regarded as entangled processes that cannot be strictly isolated except for specific methodological purposes. (…). [T]he enactive framework, building on DST and post-cognitivist approaches to language, emphasises the inextricable links between different cognitive domains, as well as between brains, bodies, and the environment. (…) The result is an alternative to modular understandings of the language-thought linkage."

Finally, Chris Sinha's semiotic 'niche construction theory' fits in this list, cf. Sinha (2013: 266): "Signs are both transformative cognitive tools, and constitutive of specifically human cultural ecologies. The human semiotic capacity triggered transformative effects across all or most cognitive domains, thereby potentiating human symbolic cultures, which constitute the biocultural complexes in which human cultural innovation and transmission occur." The 'linguistic niche' that language contributed to human life is part of a complex of semiotic niches, cf. Sinha (2015: 3): "[T]he biocultural niche of language … is intricately interwoven with the other material and symbolic artifactual niche-structures that make up the human biocultural complex. See also Sinha (2024: 217): "I argue in this chapter that niche construction theory lends support to a socio-ecological theory of language as simultaneously a biocultural niche and the foundational human social institution; and propose an integrated account of biocultural evolutionary processes not only in the distant past of human ancestors, but also in historical time".

These modern frameworks have a strong affinity with Pragmatism, a philosophical line of thinking that originated with American philosophers such as Peirce, James, Dewey and Mead. Regarding the various dimensions of human life, Pragmatism focuses on the functional connections and interactions between those dimensions rather than stressing their independence and autonomy. In the following sections, we will outline pragmatist ideas, particularly regarding the relationship between language and other aspects of life. Section 4 will succinctly describe the main tenets of "enlanguaged experience", involving the idea of circular continuity and an emphasis on the ecological dimension.

3. Pragmatist insights into language

In a brilliant essay that has finally been translated and published in English, Jean-Pierre Cometti argues that Classical Pragmatists never underestimated language in favor of experience, contrary to what has been claimed by Neopragmatists – especially Richard Rorty (1982). On the contrary, their inquiries into language can prove fruitful for the philosophy of

language, which has suffered from a lack of attention to the social dimension of linguistic practices (Cometti, 2025). We add that the broadly naturalistic approach to language of John Dewey, Frank Lorimer and George Herbert Mead is also fruitful for bridging the gap with its embodied dimension, which has affected both mainstream philosophy of language and cognitive linguistics (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Kemmerer, 2023). The polarization between experience and language that arose in analytic philosophy after the so-called "linguistic turn" led to the marginalization of the embodied and social features of human language. In the meantime, linguistics – whether based on generative, structuralist or cognitive perspectives (summarized as "autonomous positions" in the previous section, point 1) – endorsed a similarly polarizing attitude by isolating language from its experience within concrete human practices. This was reflected in a consistent privileging of syntax over pragmatics, of language as an autonomous system of interrelated signs over linguistic utterances and practices, and in the assumption that language functions as an (ancillary) part of the allegedly representational and computational system of cognition.

We argue that the Classical Pragmatists made important contributions to bridging the alleged gap between experience and language by explicitly endorsing the idea of a fundamental continuity between the two[2] In the next section (§ 4), we will radicalize the Pragmatists' legacy by proposing that human experience is enlanguaged (Dreon, 2022, 2024). A pragmatist approach, we argue, involves a circular idea of continuity between experience and language rather than a linear, purely grounding one, along with an emphasis on the ecological dimension of experience.

For now, we want to focus schematically on some crucial points for understanding the Pragmatists' insights into language as continuous with experience. First, they considered experience to be primarily a function of life rather than cognition, avoiding the typical mentalistic conception of experience as something occurring within the alleged "interior theatre" of the mind. As clearly stated in *The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy*, experience is viewed within the framework of biological continuity, where the human animal is considered to be continuous with other organic forms, though it is in a process of more complex organization (Dewey, 1980). Hence, experience is not primarily a cognitive relationship established by an independent subject with an external object, in which the world is represented in the subject's mind. Rather, experience consists of the complex set of relations between living beings and their environments, through which organic life is constituted as a part of that very environment (Dewey, 1989, Ch I). It occurs in the world, is genuinely objective, and results in actual changes to both the structure of the organisms and their environment, though these changes can occur on very different time scales (Dewey, 1980). In short, Dewey embraced an ecological view of experience, which he defined as occurring in the environment and consisting of the interactions that continuously take place between organisms and their environment. His view of experience is also strongly embodied, insofar as it cannot be reduced to brain mechanisms. Although all of the Classical Pragmatists were greatly interested in experimental psychology from its inception, they never adopted a brain-centred stance. Rather, they believed that experience involves the entire organism as well as its natural and social environment: "Experience is not identical with brain action; it is the entire organic agent-patient in all its interaction with the environment, natural and social. The brain is primarily an organ of a certain kind of behaviour, not of knowing the world" (Dewey, 1980). Finally, both James and Dewey embraced pluralistic views of experience, involving not only knowledge but also other "ways of doing and suffering" – feelings, longings and desires, and the complex fabric of what James called the "aesthetic sphere of the mind" (James, 1884: 188), or, in Dewey's terms, the "qualitative" features of experience (Alexander, 1987; Johnson, 2007). As we will see later, experience includes reflective phases in living beings capable of movement and speech – that is, beings that can distance themselves from immediate consummation and postpone the fulfilment of an act (Mead, 1938). Nevertheless, it cannot be reduced to cognition alone (Dewey, 1905; James, 1976).

Second, the Pragmatists focused on language as resulting from a series of contingent evolutionary events that caused the disruption and reuse of previously existing resources (Lorimer, 1929; Parravicini, 2019), and played a key role in human phylogeny. Specifically, they claimed that language was crucial to the emergence of mental behavior and the rise of typically human forms of organic–environmental interaction (Dewey, 1981; Lorimer, 1929; Mead, 2015). The advent of language transformed earlier forms of organic–environmental interaction in a variety of ways. Most notably, it enhanced the ability to postpone the impact of the environment on organic life – a capacity first introduced in animal life through movement – by enabling the use of things and events as signs referring to other, not currently present, things and features. Dewey argues that language transformed the kind of "feelings" found in non-human animals – that is, the immediate experience of one's surroundings as dangerous or welcoming – into experiences charged with "meanings", thereby giving rise to mental behaviors in humans. According to Dewey (and building on Peirce's distinction), this means considering the transformation of experience through language as involving not only dyadic connections – being immediately affected by the environment – but also triadic relations, which imply the use of things and events as signs for further possible consequences (Dewey, 1981). Consequently, language appears to be much more than a mere vehicle of thought, "responsible for 'translating' an inner mental medium that Fodor calls the 'language of thought' into communicable form (Fodor 1975; Rodríguez and Di Paolo 2025: 6). As emphasized by Frank Lorimer, a scholar who wrote his PhD thesis under Dewey's supervision, language affected previously existing forms of organic intelligence, enlarging the space for reflection, inference and instrumental action (Lorimer 1929, Dreon 2024). However, the Pragmatists did not propose a new version of the *scala naturae*: the

[2] For alternative interpretations of the relationship between experience and language among Pragmatists, albeit from different points of view, see Rorty (1982), Shusterman, 1992, Alexander (1987), Johnson (2007); Henning (2022).

emergence of language within organic–environmental interaction is completely contingent and does not correspond to an alleged teleological design[3] Moreover, language was understood as a multilayered and multifunctional phenomenon that supports social ties primarily on qualitative-affective grounds (Dewey, 1981), makes things and events common (Dewey, 1989), enables the mutual coordinating of social behavior across various scales (habitual, institutional, individual) and operates both analytically and holistically (see Section 5 on this last issue)[4]

Third, the Pragmatists assumed that experience is always felt, because it is primarily a function of organic life in an environment to which organisms are constitutively exposed to a greater or lesser extent, rather than a form of cognition. Hence, emotions are viewed as emotional episodes within the continuum of a primarily qualitative, aesthetic or felt experience (according to the etymological roots of the term). The Pragmatists also considered language to be genetically intertwined with emotions and viewed both emotive and linguistic gestures as scaffolding social interactions (Mead, 1895, 2011), as we will see in Section 6.

To summarize the Pragmatists' legacy, they developed a complex view of language as an integral part of human behavior and experience, privileging the idea of "continuity with difference" (Bernstein, 2020), which – as we will see shortly – involves the need to account for the transformation and reorganization of pre-existing resources.

4. Human experience is enlanguaged, language is an integral part of human experience

Building on the Classical Pragmatists' continuistic stance on language and experience, Dreon (2022, 2024) suggested radicalizing and making their legacy more explicit by developing the "enlanguaged experience" hypothesis. This proposal begins with raw experience and involves a circular continuity, or feedback action, while placing special focus on the environment as an integral part of experiential transactions, as will be clarified later.

Rather than taking a quasi-Platonic stance toward language as a kind of independent realm, we begin with human experience in the wild – that is, in the usual contexts and situations where human interactions unfold. Human experience appears to be entangled with words, utterances, speech and other broadly linguistic exchanges from the very beginning. From newborns' earliest perceptions of their surroundings to adults' everyday interactions with their natural and social environment, human interactions occur within contexts consisting of broadly linguistic practices: even when we act or move silently or alone, our actions, feelings and thoughts often depend on words previously spoken, on past conversations and on more or less cooperative forms of communication that have become embedded in our behavior and now seem to scaffold them. Consider, for example, a silent and solitary experience such as swimming. Someone who loves swimming may focus on their somatic experience when entering the pool (Shusterman, 2008). They may become attentive to the labor and effort of their muscles at the beginning of the session and to the satisfying flow of their movements once they find their rhythm. Of course, swimming is not made of words, but of water, physical exertion, bodily habits and other circumstances. To be clear, this is not the point: we are not supporting either an idealistic account of swimming as if it were created through language, nor a quasi-transcendental view that considers language the condition of possibility for swimming (Gadamer, 2004, Apel, 1972; McDowell, 1996). However, silent words and thoughts constantly accompany us when we swim. If we want to experience a pure bodily feeling, we must make an effort to set words and thoughts aside and become completely absorbed by movements through the water. Of course, the degree to which an experience is enlanguaged also depends on the kind of people involved and the specific situation at hand. Some individuals are more silent – either by personal inclination or because of their profession or social role. Nevertheless, these differences should not cause us to overlook the fact that even silent practices are entrained and unfold within a broadly enlanguaged human environment. From this point of view, an experience without words seems to be the result of an abstraction process rather than representing what is immediately given in ordinary human practices. Stating that human experience is enlanguaged means that we do not primarily encounter language in an isolated or pure form – whatever that might mean: an innate grammar universally at work in the human mind and only later expressed through natural languages; a synchronic system of signs defined by their mutual relations rather than their reference to the external world; or a more or less efficient tool for making references. Rather, we primarily encounter language as part of the social setting we are embedded in from the very beginning: a caregiver attuned to a baby's early babbling; parents clashing with an adolescent's demands; a group of welcoming friends or enemies who threaten your standing; or perfect strangers who ignore your issues. Moreover, as emphasized by supporters of the languaging hypothesis (Love, 2017; Cowley, 2019; Bottineau, 2008; Raimondi, 2019), we experience words as deeply interwoven with other communicative components of our behaviour, such as real voices, the rhythm of conversations, pauses and bodily gestures. These contribute to the meaning of what we say, so much so that they can make or break a conversation, as is commonly acknowledged in intimate relationships and diplomatic settings.

In response to this argument, the usual reductive strategy is to object that such accounts reflect mere subjective experience; "in reality", it is said, what is happening are computational processes in the brain, mental representations being processed within the conscious mind, or something along those lines. Here, James's and Dewey's "postulate of immediate

[3] This is a complicated issue that we cannot delve into in this paper. For a more in-depth treatment, see Dreon (2022): 23 and ff.

[4] As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, the Classical Pragmatists' stance toward language seems to converge with the soviet tradition dating back to Bakhtin and Vygotsky, who privileged socially shared linguistic dialogues and practices, their embodiment, their role in shaping human thought and sensibility, as well as "semiotic mediation" as a key concept (cf. Valsiner and Van Der Veer, 1988; Shotter and Billig, 1998).

empiricism" becomes particularly relevant – namely, their insistence on respecting the full variety of experience (James, 1976; Dewey, 1905): why should we state that the scientific findings of, say, psycholinguistics are more real than our ordinary experience of language in the wild? For James and Dewey, immediate empiricism holds that everything, in the ordinary sense of the term, must be taken as it is in immediate experience, not merely as a phenomenon pointing to some allegedly more real underlying content. The horse experienced by the jockey as docile or untameable is no less real than the horse studied by the zoologist or defined by the linguist writing an entry in a dictionary. It is unfair to trace the former back to the latter by looking beyond or beneath experience for something to justify it. Why should we deny our experience of language as part of the human world and reduce it to a mere epiphenomenon of either mental entities or brain processes? Of course, scientific accounts are immensely significant – for example, for producing drugs. Nevertheless, they are the final outcome of highly complex laboratory practices designed for specific goals, rather than an accurate representation of the ultimate structure of experience. Similarly, linguists could provide extremely powerful tools for second language learners by isolating grammatical rules and a dictionary from real–life interactions. However, these linguistic features should not be assumed to be the ultimate components of language, underlying human enlanguaged experience.

Returning to the central subject of this section, it is time to clarify that the enlanguaged experience hypothesis involves the idea of a mutual conditioning between the linguistic features of experience and other organic, bodily and perceptive aspects, or, in other words, a form of circular continuity. The core insight we take from Dewey and Lorimer is that the emergence of language from a series of already existing natural resources is not simply an extension of previous forms of experience grounded in them. The advent of language produced a transformation of animal sensibility into human sensibility and intelligence; it had an impact on pre-existing forms of experience and profoundly reorganized them into new modes of organic–environmental interaction. This feedback effect of language on organic experience must be considered across multiple scales and in relation to different domains of experience. In the second part of this paper, we will explore how broadly linguistic practices contribute to the configuration of human emotions.

Circular continuity – or the loop effects of language on previous forms of experience – is particularly significant when compared to an alternative interpretation of the continuity between experience and language. This alternative view, influential in many post-cognitive approaches (such as embodied, grounded and enacted accounts) within both philosophy and linguistics, is largely inspired by the phenomenological tradition (especially the work of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty). This is the case with the Motivation and Sedimentation Model proposed by Oakley and Zlatev (2024), which essentially grounds language in experience but excludes the reverse influence. This is also one of the main tenets of Lakoff and Johnson's theory of linguistic metaphors as grounded in bodily experience. However, their account overlooks the feedback effects that linguistic metaphors can exert on how we experience the world (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). To simplify the argument, the standard broadly phenomenological assumption about the relationship between experience and language tends to involve a form of linear or unidirectional continuity – namely, the idea that language is grounded in bodily experience, but not vice versa. Although enactivism is making strong efforts to depart from this scheme, as emphasized in Section 2 (Di Paolo, De Jaegher, Cuffari, 2018; Kiverstein, Rietvelt, 2021; Dreon, 2024; Rodríguez-Jordá, Di Paolo, 2025), this hierarchical model remains central to the scholarship. This is particularly evident in Jordan Zlatev's Semiotic Hierarchy Model (Zlatev, 2018). In it, Zlatev proposes a five-level model of meaning, beginning with life, or biological meaning, and progressing to the subject and its sensorimotor capacities, intersubjectivity and sign function, before culminating in language. To avoid the objection that this framework implies the superiority of the final stage over the earlier ones, and the idea of a *scala naturae* from animals to humans, Zlatev states that each level stands in a dynamic *Fundierung* relationship with the preceding one and is characterized by both spontaneity and sedimentation. The problem is that, although this superimposition of different layers of meaning may effectively illustrate how various living beings interact with their environments, its direct application to human experience raises concerns. For example, we have some doubts about the alleged priority of subjective semiotic activity over intersubjective meaning-making – though this is not the issue at stake in this paper. More importantly, the model appears to be transferred wholesale to human experience, thereby preserving the claim that embodied sense-making retains primacy over linguistic sense-making *even in humans*. In contrast to the models based on hierarchical order or the additive superimposition of layers, we are suggesting there is circularity and mutual conditioning among various resources, concerning both human organisms and their environment. The way we speak with others reorganizes how we experience them, as well as the world. In other words, both the social and the natural environment are affected by people's linguistic interactions. Past conversations, linguistic habits, and communicative practices are sedimented in the human environment and become part of it, changing it from within – for better or worse. In turn, changes in human ecology influence human experience, which is to say our interactions with a complex environment that is naturally social, enculturated and enlanguaged. In other words, the linear continuity hypothesis is untenable when we consider the environment as a factor that enters into human experience and behavior as much as individual resources. The absence of ecological awareness in human experience is evident when discussing situations of alleged pure bodily perception in prelinguistic babies. Of course, very young babies cannot speak, but they engage in multimodal conversations with their caregivers from an early age. These conversations involve bodily movement, eye contact, facial expressions and gestures on both sides, as well as the infant's shrieks and vocalizations and the caregiver's so-called motherese – as extensively studied by Colwyn Trevarthen (Trevarthen, 1979, cf. also Stern et al., 1985). Thus, neonates learn to perceive and discriminate their still-limited world while already being entrained in conversations composed of both bodily and verbal gestures. These exchanges are affectively shared from the very beginning, although cultural variations and familial specificities can be significant, even within the same culture. From an ecological perspective on human experience and behavior, neonatal

perception appears to emerge within an already shared, linguistically scaffolded environment, rather than from isolated individual utterances.

To conclude our argument: while grounding language in bodily experience is a necessary corrective to treating language as an autonomous system, it is not enough. In what follows, we apply the enlanguaged experience framework to propose an integrated view of human emotions — understood as behavioral wholes that involve bodily and linguistic gestures as constitutive parts, rather than as mere external expressions of a pre-existing inner states. We introduce the idea of enlanguaged emotions by following a similar method to that used in the first part of the paper. In Section 5, we provide a schematic map of the four main positions on the relationships between emotions and language in current research as a useful tool for navigating the debate. We then consider some pragmatist insights related to the issue at hand: the critique of the standard dualistic view of emotions — as consisting of a separate psychic state and its external bodily or facial expression — and the idea that language primarily consists of conversations of gestures derived from conversations of affective-based gestures (§ 6). Finally, we conclude our argument by introducing our concept of human emotions as enlanguaged (§ 7).

5. Recent research on language and emotion

The four positions (and their implied continuous spectrum) can be explored with respect to language and experience in general, as we did in Section 2, or with respect to only parts of them. Examples of parts of language include phonology, morphology, lexicon and syntax; examples of parts of experience include sensory perception, higher cognition, intersubjectivity, bodily feelings and, last but not least, emotions. For a specific project, it is advisable to narrow the focus of the research question and ask: Which aspect of experience does this specific aspect of language affect, in what way, to what extent and under which circumstances? We cannot rule out the possibility that the various dimensions of language and experience are related differently. For example, it is possible that word meaning has a strong impact on cognitive categorization or that action has a strong impact on sentence structure (the verb and its 'actants'). Clearly, this situation opens a broad spectrum of research possibilities. In this paper, we will focus on one aspect of experience, namely emotion, and explore its relationship to language. We will revisit the four positions we have outlined above, giving special attention to the last and most radical one.

If you start examining the literature on emotion theory, you will soon come across the phenomenon of 'school building'. Along a continuous spectrum, one extreme is occupied by researchers who advocate for 'innate emotions', i.e. the view that emotions are biologically hardwired, not impacted by (variations in) culture and language. At the other are researchers who take a relativist position, assuming that emotions are not 'fixed' but vary under the influence of emotion-external dimensions like culture and language. This position is known as the Theory of Constructed Emotions (TCE). For a first, accessible overview of this spectrum, see Irish (2025).

1. Emotion and language are autonomous

Innate-oriented theories claim that language and emotion each have their own innate basis, development and dynamics, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. This does not exclude that a grown-up human being can talk about emotions or that emotions can find their way into utterances through the use of expressive interjections and marked prosody or syntax. However, these connections are superficial and do not fundamentally impact their respective internal structures. On the linguistic side, we have already mentioned generative grammar as a theory that stresses the innateness and autonomy of the language faculty. In emotion theory, a similar position is held by Ekman (2016), for example. A recent statement by Wharton and De Saussure (2023: 81) also aligns with this view: "[W]e claim that (…) the lack of a word for 'fear' in Tahitian has little to no consequence on the emotional life of the inhabitants of Tahiti."

2. Emotion impacts language structure

In this position, it is emphasized that, in addition to rational cognitive content, emotional-expressive content is also an important part of what speakers communicate. This type of content is strongly conveyed through nonverbal and para-verbal channels (voice, marked intonation). However, linguists have increasingly realized that phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon can — and indeed should — be considered from the perspective of their expressive function as well. For overviews of this position, see Foolen (2012, 2016), Corver (in press) and the contributions to Gutzmann and Turgay, 2025.

3. Language filters emotion

Here, we can refer to the third stance in Section 3, in which the 'filtering position' was considered with regard to experience in general. Traces of this position can be found in a recent publication on emotion theory. Van Heijst et al. (2025) discuss the theory of basic emotions in relation to the theory of constructed emotions, proposing a synthesis of the two. Followwing Damasio (2004), they distinguish between 'emotion' and 'feeling'. Whereas emotion is "a bioregulatory response to an external event that promotes survival (…), feeling is "the *cognitive interpretation* of the physiological changes. Feelings can arguably be studied only in humans and can be measured only indirectly (by verbal/written report)." In a

critical discussion, Feldman Barrett et al. (2025) argue against this dualist modelling, clearly taking a position that we will now discuss as 'position 4'.

4. Language and emotion are 'entangled'

According to this view, emotions are not simply given in an autonomous, bioregulatory manner. Rather, they are 'constructed' and language plays a role in this process. The Theory of Constructed Emotion (TCE) is an influential approach in psychology and neuroscience, cf. Feldman Barrett (2017: 16): "[I]t makes no sense to elevate categories for anger, sadness, fear, disgust and happiness to a common ethological framework for comparing humans with other animals, when there is ample evidence from linguistics, anthropology and psychology that these categories do not offer a robust, universal framework for comparing humans of different cultures."

In their aforementioned critical comment on van Heijst et al. (2025), Feldman Barrett et al. (2025: 395) stress that words are part of the transfer process between generations, including how emotion is experienced: "The action and words of one generation affect the brain wiring of the next generation, transmitting categories (including emotion categories) from one generation to the other, affecting a person's momentary allostasis, behaviour, and experience."

This integrated position is not new. The following quotes from earlier publications may illustrate this line of thinking. Brooks et al. (2016: 1): "It is often assumed that language merely labels or communicates emotional states that have already been generated (…). However, psychological constructionist models of emotion suggest that words that name emotion concepts ('fear', 'disgust', 'anger') are in fact constitutive of emotions. In these models, emotion words support the conceptual knowledge that helps the brain make meaning of affective sensations in a given context. In doing so, conceptual knowledge helps 'construct' emotions because it transforms ambiguous affective sensations into experiences and perceptions of certain discrete emotions." Lee and Satpute (2024: 1) take the same position: "Words such as "anger" or "fear" are typically viewed as mere labels of the emotions they signify. Yet, accumulating evidence from behavioural and neuropsychology studies suggests that emotion words may play a more fundamental role in constructing emotion representations."

The 'entanglement' position easily relates to the thesis of linguistic relativity. Depending on the language spoken, emotions vary, cf. Mesquita (2022: 138): "The emotion concepts of your language structure your experience. They are the tools that your parents use to help you make sense of ongoing events (…). What if the emotion concepts vary across languages?" And in a similar vein, Satpute and Lindquist (2021: 216) state: "[O]ur view that language shapes emotional experience dovetails with the work of others who have also argued that language plays a role in shaping other psychological phenomena (e.g., cognition, perceptual learning, and memory)." Assuming cultural variation also fits this view, cf. Feldman Barrett et al. (2025: 401): "Evidence for substantial cultural variation in emotion perception is now considerably stronger and more robust than evidence for universal similarities."

In the field of linguistics, Wiltschko (2024) subscribes to the Constructed Theory of Emotion (CTE). She particularly emphasizes that features of grammar can be found in the structure of emotions, cf. Wiltschko (2024: 35): "If indeed Grammar is the property of our linguisticality that is responsible for hierarchical composition, then we might reasonably propose that this architecture is also utilized for our emotionality." Although Wiltschko does not address the issue of relativity, we can safely assume that she would not subscribe to that view. The architecture of linguisticality and emotionality is considered as universal. Does this mean that CTE does not necessarily imply relativity? We conclude that the final word on the relationship between language and emotion has yet to be spoken.

6. Beyond the view of words as mere expressions of emotions: further insights from the pragmatists

Are there any features in the thoughts of the Classical Pragmatists that could help us support a view of human emotions as enlanguaged – that is, as reshaped and transformed by their unfolding and embedding within an environment scaffolded by broadly linguistic practices?

The Pragmatists focused on emotions from the very beginning, and a substantial body of literature on this topic has emerged (cf. Cunningham, 1995; Garrison, 2003; Quéré, 2013; Dreon, 2019; Baggio et al., 2019). Here, we focus on some of the Pragmatists' claims, which we believe can pave the way for developing an integrated approach to emotion and language.

In a nutshell, the Pragmatists put much effort into overcoming the traditional dualistic view of emotion as basically consisting of two separate parts: the emotion itself, which is an alleged mental or inner state, and its mere outer expression through bodily and facial gestures – where 'expression' means the exterior conveyance of an antecedent content that is established or fixed *per se*, independently of bodily and facial gestures.

In his pivotal essay *What is an emotion?* and later in his psychological masterpiece (James, 1884, 1981), James argued against the idea that bodily changes are merely expressions of emotions conceived as mental states. He deliberately avoided the term "expression" to prevent misleading interpretations. Since Darwin's theory of emotional expressions served as a key reference point for James' alternative proposal, this move constituted a more or less explicit critique of Darwin's view. According to the latter, emotions acquired a communicative function to convey an antecedent mental state to others once they had lost their primary adaptive function (such as preparing to flee or attack) in evolutionary history. James claims that viewing emotions as pre-existing their alleged manifestation contributed to hypostatizing them into "eternal and sacred

psychic entities" (James, 1981: 1065), fixed once and for all in the mind or brain structures, independently of the interactions between the organism and its environment, including other organisms (see Ekman's position on basic universal emotions, as mentioned in the previous Section). James' famous definition of emotion as consisting in the feeling of bodily changes as they occur following the direct perception of an exciting fact (James, 1981: 1065) should dispel the notion of an independent mind stuff preceding bodily manifestations and provide a unitary idea of "the entire organism" (James, 1981: 1066) involved in the emotional experience. However, this formulation was slippery, as James himself later acknowledged. The scholarship interpreted it as implying the overturning of the dualism between bodily movements and interior feeling rather than the overcoming of the dichotomy[5]

Dewey lucidly saw the problem in his essays on *Emotional attitudes* and *The significance of emotion*. He recognized the limitations of James' definition and was able to build on Darwin's work by considering the emotions in the background of goal-oriented action, while rejecting any dichotomic approach. In short, he supported the view that emotions are integrated behavioral wholes constitutively related to environmental features, namely the functions of something that occurs within a situation and contributes to experiencing it rather than closing subjects off in their allegedly pure interior lives. In his view, emotions include bodily aspects such as sensorimotor coordination, as well as a crisis in the case of negative emotions. They also involve readiness to act in a certain context or to modify one's behavior in a changed situation. Finally, emotions imply a kind of proto-evaluation of environmental circumstances as welcoming or dangerous, friendly, comfortable or threatening on a broadly affective level. For the issue at stake in this paper, Dewey's important point is that he considered these distinctions between bodily, behavioral and evaluative features as functional and related to the observer's point of view, rather than ontologically primitive (Dewey, 1971a, 358, cf. Garrison, 2003). Ultimately, for Dewey, emotions are behavioral wholes with a beginning and an end within an experience that is always qualitatively, aesthetically or affectively laden (cf. Colombetti, 2014). More importantly for the issue at stake in this paper, gestures enter into the constitution of emotions: they are an integral part of emotion, not a later addition. Building on Dewey's work, Fausto Caruana and Vittorio Gallese (in Caruana, 2017; Gallese-Caruana, 2016) recently challenged the neural underpinnings of the dualistic view of "emotion experience" and "emotion expression". They found empirical evidence supporting an integrated view of emotions. In the current debate, Lisa Feldman Barrett et alii argue against the separation of biological regulation through bodily changes at various levels (neurological, muscular and behavioral) and feelings, providing empirical evidence of the simultaneous and intertwined processing of both allostatic adjustments and features of lived experience, such as feelings throughout the brain (Feldman Barrett et al., 2025).

Returning to Dewey, he argued that the dualistic paradigm concerning emotions had often been carried over into the philosophy of art, implying the assumption that the core of an artwork is an inner content – a (lyrical) emotion, the artist's intention or a deep meaning – that is merely conveyed outwardly through artistic means, conceived as an additional, marginal level (cf. Croce or Bell as paradigmatic examples) (Dewey, 1981: 291–292). Alternatively, he developed an idea of artistic expression as the actual transformation of pre-existing resources – organic and environmental, material and cultural – into a new organized whole, capable of generating new experiences of the shared world (Dewey, 1989, Chs. 4 and 5).

We emphasize this point to make it clearer that the dualistic view of emotion as a pre-existent mental state that is separate from and ontologically prior to its transmission to the public sphere is significant for the problem we are addressing here. The same paradigm introduced between inner states and bodily movements is frequently and implicitly applied to the relationship between emotions and their allegedly merely linguistic expressions, as exemplified by the first position outlined in the previous section. Could we, alternatively, adopt an integrated view of emotions that considers linguistic gestures – including not only words and sentences, but also interjections, prosody, timbre and other communicative features – as well as bodily gestures as constitutive elements, assuming that human experience and the human world are enlanguaged?

Before exploring this hypothesis in the next section, we would like to highlight two further important insights into the relationship between language and emotions, derived from George Herbert Mead. By drawing on Wundt, Mead regarded language as genetically entangled with emotions, insofar as verbal communication develops affectively grounded communication (Mead, 1895, 2011). Evidently, Mead adopted both a continuistic approach to speech – viewing it as emerging out of emotive conversations of gestures already present in the animal world – and an essentially social perspective on both emotions and language, which he primarily considered to be a means by which interlocutors (whether silent or speaking) mutually regulate their actions and reactions. It is important to stress this continuity approach to emotions and language for the issue we are discussing in this paper because it reveals a view of verbal conversation as having an affective core: the emergence of meaning out of conversations between interlocutors implies an affective dimension that plays a central, rather than supplemental, role – contrary to the common view of words as having subjective connotations that are unessential additions to more essential denotations. The affective, emotional or aesthetic dimension of speech may become limited in human development – on both the individual and intergenerational levels – as children gradually emancipate themselves from groups of intimates, and as prehistoric humans began interacting with larger

[5] We distance ourselves from Lisa Feldman Barrett's criticism of Dewey for allegedly contributing to a dualistic interpretation of James' definition of the emotion. Even chronologically, it is evident that James himself associated his theory with that of Lange when he partially rewrote his article *What is an emotion?* as the Chapter XXV of his *Principles of Psychology*, published in 1890. In his subsequent article on the subject, *The physical basis of emotion*, published in 1894, James responded to criticism stemming from various dualistic interpretations of his theory. Hence, both the juxtaposition of James' and Lange's theories and dualistic misunderstandings of James' account were already circulating before Dewey's first article on the topic, *Emotional attitudes*, was published – in 1894, contemporaneously with James' second paper.

societies that included unfamiliar people. In *Self, Mind, and Society*, Mead attributed a key role to language in communicative practices, as it enables the sharing of generalized objects with generalized interlocutors – that is, it allows action to extend into shared spaces and toward common goals beyond the limited space of relationships with intimates (Mead, 2015). However, as Dewey notes in an insightful passage referring to Malinowski's *The meaning of meaning*, the primary function of language among humans is phatic, facilitating the formation and maintenance of social bonds, as well as supporting cooperative practices (Dewey, 1981). Therefore, we could argue that the Pragmatists anticipated a "distributed language approach" (Cowley, 2019; Steffensen, 2024) by rejecting individualism as the standard methodological approach. They considered language within shared contexts and participatory situations, whether peaceful or aggressive, given the strong mutual dependence that characterizes the human physiological condition from birth. They also upheld a non-reductive view of language: while recognizing that language powerfully enhanced instrumental action, inference making, generalizing habits, and analytic or synthetic dispositions, they did not reduce language to cognition or oppose it to feeling, as was typical in much of the philosophical tradition (cf. Schopenhauer, 2010). Instead, they remained consistently attentive to the qualitative fabric of language and its entanglement with feelings and emotions (James, 1981; Lorimer, 1929).

Complementarily, we emphasize that Mead's continuity thesis on emotions and language, viewed primarily from a social perspective, also entails a critique of Wundt's dualistic framework. Mead rejected Wundt's pre-established parallelism between the physical and the psychical, and – in the case of emotion – the distinction between allegedly merely internal states and their outer expressions through the body and face. In contrast, Mead understood emotive gestures within conversational contexts as behavioral wholes whose function is to regulate social interactions mutually; they serve as a means of taking the role of the other, of feeling their readiness to act in a certain way and attuning to their conduct, whether friendly or aggressive. Later, Mead applied this insight to verbal exchanges, proposing a similar line of development regarding meanings: verbal gestures in their full complexity – including not only words, but also interjections, excitations, pauses and half sentences – are not merely outward expressions of pre-existing meanings in the speaker's mind, but rather constitutive components of those meanings and of the real contexts in which they arise.

Now, we suggest developing the Pragmatists' insights into the hypothesis that verbal gestures enter into the configuration of human emotions. More specifically, this hypothesis characterizes a kind of experiential interaction between organisms whose environment is strongly enlanguaged.

7. On human emotions as enlanguaged

Concluding, let us return to the question posed above: Could we derive from the Pragmatists' legacy an integrated view of human emotions as involving both linguistic and bodily gestures in their constitution? Our response is yes. Human emotions, of course, derive from a long history of animal life constitutively exposed to its environment. In other words, life itself cannot be indifferent to the environmental conditions with which it interacts, as these conditions enter the very constitution of the organism in various forms – from oxygen and nourishment to companionship. Living beings are not pure consciousness in a vacuum; rather, they are strictly dependent on their environment for survival and potential flourishing. This involves establishing enriching rhythmic dynamics with their environment – what neuroscientists call allostasis (Johnson and Schulkin, 2023; Feldman Barrett et al., 2025). Emotions are essentially part of these dynamics that characterize organic beings in so far as they are radically embedded in an environment and feel it as welcoming, hostile, warm, cold and so on. Most emotions arise from the tension between the establishment of relatively flexible channellings of both organic and environmental resources (Lorimer, 1929: 13, Dreon, 2022, Ch. 4) – namely, when a crisis occurs in habitual behavior (Dewey, 1971a). Hence, according to the broadly naturalistic stance adopted by the Pragmatists, emotions are functions of organism–environment interactions. However, pragmatic naturalism is not reductive, because it involves an ecological stance that sees the environment in which each organism is embedded – and with which it interacts – as a constitutive feature of those interactions. In the case of humans, Dewey argued in favor of cultural naturalism (Dewey, 1991: 28), namely the idea that culture and language evolve from previous forms of organic–environmental interactions and have a feedback effect on them. In other words, pragmatic naturalism (Bernstein, 2020) takes into account the dynamic nature of the environment itself, including its transformation through organic, cultural and linguistic practices, as well as its potential to transform pre-existing forms of experience. At the emotional level, this means that human emotions, although being continuous with those of non-speaking animals, cannot be equated with them, because neonates do not begin to feel pain and pleasure in a silent world but in a more or less pervasively enlanguaged environment. This change at the ecological level must have had an impact on the configuration of human emotions, even though this does not mean that emotions are socially constructed in the idealistic sense of the term. More precisely, we claim that linguistic gestures – not only words, but linguistic habits more broadly, i.e. relatively stable ways of interacting and doing things through speech – enter into the constitution of human emotions. The variety, nuances and complexity of human emotions are far from reducible to a basic universal classification into fixed standards, whether mental entities or innate brain processes, because such a view assumes a static picture of human natural endowment, as if it would be independent of the environmental circumstances and practices where human experience, including emotions, unfolds. If, following the pragmatists, we concede that bodily gestures are integral parts of emotions rather than later additions to alleged internal states, then we must also consider that linguistic gestures, habits and behaviors enter into the constitution of human emotions and contribute to configuring uniquely human emotions and sensibilities. This is evident, for example, in how human emotions are shaped through broadly linguistic practices, from lullabies and storytelling to ritual ceremonies and practices.

The position that we have developed by building on the Pragmatists' legacy is consistent with the so-called Theory of Constructed Emotion, as described by Lisa Feldman Barrett et al. (2025). As already mentioned, her work, as well as Caruana and Gallese's inquiries, provides empirical evidence supporting the claim that the processing of the affective component, or feeling, and the processing of motor features – the so-called bodily and facial expressions of emotions – are integrated within the same functional network, engaging the whole brain rather than distinct modules (Caruana, 2017). Feldman Barrett and her group clearly state that when speaking of events involving the entire brain, one must assume that the regulation of bodily states and the construction of feelings cannot be separated as two distinct phenomena regulated by separate mechanisms (Feldman Barrett et al., 2025: 396). Hence her Theory of Constructed Emotion is holistic, it sets out from a similar rejection of the position criticized by John Dewey in his famous essay on the reflex arc in psychology, namely: the assumption that human conduct consists in clearly independent components (perceptual stimuli and motor response), which then requires one to explain how such "disiecta membr[a]" can be put together (Dewey, 1971b: 100). Explicitly inspired by a complex, dynamic and non-deterministic view of human nature, as well as by a strong emphasis on the specifically constructed niche in which human lives unfold, she also rejects the framework of the so-called Basic Emotion Theory. According to her theory, there are no fixed, universal basic emotions grounded in neural programs – fixed ones and for all in the genes – independent of cultural contexts. Instead, emotions are a complex of relationships among organic and cultural signals organized differently according to different life contexts, including their linguistic features (Feldman Barrett et al., 2025: 402). More precisely, Feldman Barrett and her research group support the view that emotion words are categories that reduce the complexity of emotional experience through abstraction processes grounded in functional equivalence across different contexts (Feldman Barrett et al., 2025: 406).

Our proposal of enlanguaged emotions in this paper is speculative and focused on the conceptual framework rather than empirical evidence. However, it is helpful to add a couple of caveats. First, we prefer to speak of emotions as 'enlanguaged' rather than 'constructed' because the latter term can be misleading and philosophically problematic. It may be interpreted in quasi-idealistic terms, implying a culturalist view that human emotions are entirely built through social forces and cultural manipulation, thereby denying their natural grounding (see, for example, Eva Illouz on romantic love in Illouz (2007) and Arlie Hochschild on social pressure regarding both display rules and deep feeling in Hochschild (1979). Feldman Barrett is aware of this problem and emphasizes that her approach differs from constructivist positions in emotion theory. Her Theory of Constructed Emotions does not reduce emotions to mere cultural constructs, as the organic component remains central in her view. What is constructed, according to Feldman Barrett, are prototypical categories for emotions, which organize emotional experience into different cultural forms – particularly on a linguistic basis – through emotion words that function as abstraction tools for grouping and generalizing functionally similar events across different linguistic contexts. However, we believe that our human emotions as "enlanguaged" not only avoids the constructionist misunderstanding, but also provides a third way beyond the dichotomies of nature and culture, universalism and relativism, and a priori or innate conditions and empirical variances. As stated in Section 4, the enlanguaged experience hypothesis is grounded in a continuity thesis that views language as a development of pre-existing forms of organic–environmental interactions. At the same time, it adopts a dynamic view of organic interactions as affected and reshaped by new emergent features in the environment, including linguistic behavior. Consequently, it rejects both a static and deterministic view of human nature and the notion that emotions are entirely constituted by the social world and cultural environment. In a nutshell, our proposal advocates a non-dualistic bio-cultural approach to human emotions. Second, as previously mentioned, the Theory of Constructed Emotions emphasizes the role of emotion words in shaping human emotions and sensibility. By viewing emotions as a behavioral complex and language as primarily linguistic gestures within social contexts, we emphasize the role of broadly linguistic habits and practices in the formation of human emotions, rather than focusing on individual words. We have already hinted at the role of storytelling in shaping human emotions. This includes everything from fairy tales and legends to novels and the reconstruction of personal memories and gossip. Rituals and artistic practices are also pivotal in fostering shared and culturally specific emotions and sensibilities. Our emphasis on linguistic habits and practices aligns with the languaging stance supported by Cowley, Bottineau and Raimondi, among others. However, this topic would take us too far afield, so we cannot explore it further in this paper.

To conclude, what consequences might this approach have for empirical research in linguistics and, more broadly, in the study of human beings and society? In other words, how can the claim of human emotions as enlanguaged – to a greater or lesser extent – be translated into operative research programs? This is a serious question we cannot tackle in this paper and must save for another time. Here, our aim has been to provide an original and coherent theoretical framework for approaching emotions and language by considering them as *de facto*, yet irreversibly, entangled within the human world.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Roberta Dreon: Writing – original draft. **Ad Foolen:** Writing – original draft.

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No data was used for the research described in the article.

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