



Revisiting normativity for a post-cognitivist view of linguistic feeling



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ABSTRACT

This article reconsiders the role of affectivity in defining normativity in a situated sense. Traditional approaches have often construed language solely as a rule-governed system and cognition as a disembodied, mechanistic process. By contrast, we advance a view of language as a contextual and dynamical activity and situate cognition within affective life. Central to this reframing is the notion of linguistic feeling, understood as the affective attunement through which speakers experience and navigate norms. Rather than conceiving norms as only pertaining to convention and public criteria, we defend their function as conditions for rational experience: norms become intelligible through felt sensibilities of rightness, appropriateness, and variation. This approach overcomes internalist accounts that isolate linguistic intuitions from social and embodied contexts, showing instead how linguistic feeling is an affective manifestation of the same conceptual capacities that render us responsive to reasons. By integrating the affective and linguistic sciences, the philosophy of the space of reasons, and post-cognitivism, the paper offers a reconceptualization of normativity as rooted in sensibility. The conclusion highlights implications for linguistics, philosophy, and cognitive science, urging a shift from formalist and conventionalist models toward approaches that acknowledge the constitutive role of affect in language and rationality.

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If the human being had animal *drives*, he could not have that which we now call *reason* in him; for precisely these drives would naturally tear his forces so obscurely towards a single point that no free circle of reflection would arise for him ... If the human being had animal *senses*, then he would have no *reason*; for precisely his senses' strong susceptibility to stimulation, precisely the representations mightily pressing on him through them, would inevitably choke all cold reflectiveness.

J. G. Herder, *Treatise on the Origin of Languages*

[...] *requierant omnibus aures*

Catullus, 84

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1. Introduction

What are the conditions in life that make cognition and language normative from the outset? What is the role of emotion in these conditions? This paper aims at a reconsideration of the role of affectivity in defining normativity in a situated sense. This point will be illustrated through a redefinition of the notion of “linguistic feeling”. The latter expression refers to a kind of emotion tied to one’s knowledge of a given language variety and its standard of correctness or, broadly, appropriateness in that they are upheld or violated by speakers. Simply put, whenever we feel pleasure, irritation, outrage, or delight as we encounter any bit of language being used in a way we automatically and spontaneously assess as appropriate or inappropriate, that is when we have a linguistic feeling.

An early vivid illustration of this phenomenon can be arguably found in the feelings developed by the ancient Roman poet Catullus and his friends towards an acquaintance named Arrius: they came to dread the mere notion of vowel-words out of the profound irritation caused the unnecessary –and incorrect– aspiration imprinted to them by Arrius. The poetic wit of Catullus conveys the visceral and pre-rational discomfort speakers in Rome felt towards this deviation from the norm of phonological correctness. Conversely, as soon as Arrius was sent overseas, everyone’s ears got some well-deserved rest – which only lasted until “horrible” word got back that Arrius’ aspiratory powers curled the waves of the Ionian sea into “Hionian”¹.

As relatable as it is, linguistics has struggled to pinpoint the exact nature of this widespread phenomenon – or to reach a stable consensus about it. We, instead, deem it as particularly fertile for a wider operation. Namely, enriching the post-cognitivist rethinking of language (see, for instance, Di Paolo et al., 2018; Steffensen et al., 2024, Cuffari and Figueiredo, 2025). In doing so, a situated approach is necessary to avoid dualisms, as the ones classic cognitive science endorses as well as some additive theories of rationality in which some branches within post-cognitivism may still fall into.

Linguistic feeling, with this background, allows us to put at the center of the discussion the role of emotion and language within a cohesive background that comprises normativity, affectivity, and languaging, within the same operational lines. In feeling, in expressing emotions, in responding to others, we institute the very norms that govern our affective experience. These emotions do not merely exist as internal states; they take on real force in shaping action and communication.

This essay is theoretical in nature and, as such, sets out to develop a consistent approach that may serve not only for our specific inquiry about linguistic feeling but also for further research on the relationship between emotion, language, and normativity. Therefore, before tackling linguistic feeling (Section 4), let us begin by presenting our wider theoretical framework (Section 2) and our interpretation of normativity (Section 3).

2. A post-cognitivist conceptual framework

2.1. A dynamical, situated view of language

The view of language adopted in our proposal employs the notion of *linguaging*, understood as a conception that prioritizes the situated and interactive dimension of linguistic activity, making it the first and most important *locus* of analysis. To master (a) language is not to crack a code (Love 2004), but rather to be able to take part in forms of culturally informed instances of cooperative interaction which, at times, do not even require overt or covert forms of language². What is usually left out by formal modelizations of language is the coordinative dynamics of languaging. In Steffensen et al.’s (2024, 9) words: “treating ‘language’ as a pre-given ‘object’ relies on, not empirical observation, but a history of institutionalized academic politics” as all main linguistic school of thought throughout the 20th century and beyond “all tend to reduce social activity to how people draw on ‘contexts’ and self-contained ‘signs’ (*qua* forms)”. The price that many linguistic (and psychological) approaches pay is reification, that is, a process of abstraction that renders neatly separable “language” – “seen as a system that maps (or realizes) conventional forms onto (or as) content, meaning, ideas, etc.” – from the broader sphere of “human living and experience”. Therefore, action, understood as social interaction, is the original locus of everything that pertains to language (Moyal-Sharrock, 2021). At the same time, we do not commit to every corollary associated with the most radical interpretations of the idea of languaging, especially for what concerns the ontological status of languages (see Batisti’s 2021, 2022 critiques). While we concur in seeking to avoid a retrojection of the linguist’s analytical categories as the first explanatory unit for the behavior of agents, we, at least for now, do not go as far as entirely devaluing the usefulness of more traditionally understood linguistic approaches (see Section 2.4 *infra*).

¹ “‘Hadvantages’ was what Arry used to say whenever he meant/‘advantages,’ and for ‘ambush’ he would say ‘hambush’/And he was convinced that he had spoken splendidly/when he had said ‘hambush’ for all he was worth/So I believe his mother always spoke, so her brother,/and so her father and so her mother/When he was despatched to Syria everyone’s ears had a rest/they heard the same words pronounced smoothly and lightly/and thereafter had no dread of such pronunciation/until suddenly there comes the hair-raising news/that the Ionian sea, on Arry’s arrival there,/is no longer ‘Ionian,’ but ‘Hionian’” (Catullus, 84, trans. G.P. Goold, 1983).

² Readers coming from Functional or Cognitive Linguistics may not be familiar with the notion of languaging, but with that of *usage-based* model of language. While this is not the place to explore the divergences at length, it will suffice it to say that although there is a convergence in rejecting generativist and formalist perspectives, and in emphasizing that linguistic forms emerge from usage rather than belonging to detached “language systems”, instead, “the idea of *linguaging* [...] challenges appeal to language-systems, use, and usage” on the grounds that “[a]bstracta like languages, grammar, and words are seen to hypostatize aspects of coordinated, embodied activity” (Cowley 2019, 483–484).

In (Batisti and Vidal, 2025), a genealogy of post-cognitivist approaches is traced, combining insights from Cognitive Linguistics with the philosophy of 4E cognition. A blueprint for future more comprehensive accounts of linguistic activity that aim to dispense with textualism and cognitivism alike, should start from the recognition of at least four fundamental conceptual clusters: the social and interactional dimensions of languaging, the recognition of the role of the body, the importance of ecological validity in empirical studies, and a notion of representation grounded in *praxis*.

In this paper, we take these tenets as starting points, finalized to a widening of said approach. We target *normativity* as an equally crucial notion to describe the workings of what we have called the indissoluble bonding of languaging, embodiment, and thinking. To perform this operation, a necessary prerequisite is the acknowledgment of the affective nature of cognition at all times. This idea is presented in the next section, in view of the later discussion of linguistic feeling, which intrinsically relates to affectivity.

2.2. Cognition as intrinsically affective

A rising number of recent critiques of traditional cognitive science points to the overlooking of affectivity in the study of cognitive activity. As affective sciences are currently emerging as a distinct subfield of inquiry, our ultimate aim is to highlight how its insights connect with a redefinition of cognition under post-cognitivist lights and in relation to languaging.

As Colombetti (2018, 574) explains, enactive readings of the mind are better equipped to describe how cognition ought to be conceived as intrinsically affective. Although initially an underdeveloped aspect of enactive theory, Colombetti shows how the concept of affection (i.e., the “broad capacity to be affected or ‘touched’ by something”, 574) is inscribed in the theoretical foundations of enaction. According to the latter, in fact, living systems define themselves as such through an active and interactive exploration of the environment that is guided by an adaptation for survival that has a phenomenological component to it. It is by gaining a perspective on their physical (and social) surroundings that living systems make sense of the world. Such an “interest” as diffused value should be conceived not from a purely intellectualistic stance – that is, as if it were an act of rational deliberation devoid of external influences – but rather as affective, in the sense of perfusing characteristic of the worldly experience of the living.

Cognition, in this view, is one of many instances of the sense-making activities that underlie a living being’s success in its environment. In Colombetti’s (2018, 582) phrasing, “living systems, enactively characterized, are cognitive-affective sense-making systems in virtue of their organization”.

A direct connection between the scope of the notions of, respectively, languaging and bodily sense-making on emotive grounds has been attempted before. Jensen (2014) argued against a separate understanding of the three concepts (namely, languaging, bodily sense-making, and emotions), stressing how much human activities are social and cooperative. In this, they are analogous to emotions, which, despite an obvious neurobiological basis, are better understood not as a private phenomenon but rather as forms of interpersonal attuning to the environment. However, Colombetti (2014) problematized the admittedly blurry definition employed by Jensen, including the quasi-equation he proposes between whole-bodied sense-making and languaging. The most relevant outcome of this brief discussion is the absorption of the deeply rooted intersubjective character of *both* languaging and emotions.

Colombetti’s critique, then, is based on the acknowledgment that all too encompassing notions are subject to the risk of both overlapping with each other and losing sight of other important distinctions. Taking stock of such remarks, we proceed to examine what constitutes the focus of our analysis: normativity in the context of languaging and affectivity. This, in turn, will prepare the ground to discuss linguistic feeling *per se* under a novel paradigm.

2.3. Situated normativity

A broader definition of language entails a broader definition of normativity. Historically, the notion of norms has been developed within three major linguistic traditions, i.e., Indian, European, and Arabic, before culminating in what is now known as modern linguistics (for a detailed discussion, see Itkonen 1991, 2013). Despite their differences, these traditions share the insight that language operates under a set of constraints or norms, encompassing syntactic rules (Chomsky 1980), pragmatic inferences (Grice 1975), and social standards of acceptability (Leech 1983), among others. While the precise nature of these constraints remains a topic of debate, modern linguistics and much of contemporary philosophy of language commonly regard norms as socially and conventionally grounded. In Saussure’s (1916) framework, language is likened to a chess game, a system of mutually determining categories where signs are combined in both arbitrary, but ultimately *conventional* ways.

On the philosophical front, one of the most influential views clarifying the inherently social and cultural nature of language, is Wittgenstein’s. Among several pertinent points, one could mention discussions on how the idea of having “superprivate” (Wittgenstein 1993b, 5) experiences and linguistic expressions would amount to nonsense according to our ordinary way of talking and thinking about them (Wittgenstein 2009, §§199–202); the illusory quest for “meaning” – let alone its “essence” – beyond its actual use; that learning a rule consists in its repeated application within a context of intersubjective accountability (following a rule implies correcting, being corrected, admitting errors and verbally accounting for them, etc.) (Perissinotto 2022, 196–204).

The percolation of all these views into the mainstream underscores a shared conviction: linguistic norms derive their force and intelligibility from the social contexts in which they are embedded. Within the language sciences, this conviction has often been absorbed into what is broadly termed a ‘conventionalist’ position. While the field of linguistic normativity is more nuanced than this label alone suggests, it is generally held that norms are “the object of the ‘common knowledge’ of the speakers of a particular language, the speakers’ knowledge of these norms being ultimately based on their intuition” (Mäkilähde et al., 2019, 2). Intuition, in this framework, refers to the individual’s capacity to relate to such shared knowledge. It is distinct from mere introspection or empirical observation and instead implies an interplay between individual consciousness and a socially constituted reality. In this view, norms are social entities, belong to the realm of convention, and “possess a certain degree of independence vis-à-vis what goes on in space and time. They exist not as spatiotemporal entities but as objects of *common knowledge*” (8). While important debates remain over how this social sphere relates to individual consciousness (see Zlatev and Blomberg 2019), we contend that problems arise when convention is taken as the primary or sufficient *locus* for a situated account of language and normativity³.

We argue that situatedness is not equivalent to an applied or surface-level sociological layer but must include bodily, perceptual, and ecological dimensions as constitutive of normativity itself. While the conventionalist position offers a critical stance against classical cognitivism in linguistics, post-cognitivist approaches in the broader cognitive sciences articulate a similar critique while seeking to retain a viable account of cognition. For instance, ecological psychology acknowledges the role of cultural norms in shaping the perception of affordances: “our social norms and conventions share their space with our individual perception of affordances, and sometimes our norms exert some pressure for not taking certain affordances given some social conventions” (Heras-Escribano 2019, 175). Nonetheless, embodied theories of mind often struggle to integrate their cognitive commitments with a robust account of sociality. While they allow for the inclusion of social factors as part of embodied experience, their development has tended to privilege bodily over conventional dimensions. As Segundo-Ortín (2024, 4) notes, “an ecological theory that focuses exclusively on analyzing the role that perceptual information has on perception cannot account for the fact that human perception is also shaped by the socio-cultural context in which we live” (2022, 4). Thus, whereas the conventionalist position tends to disregard embodied and affective dimensions, many post-cognitivist models encounter difficulties in reintroducing a fully social perspective and addressing the role of language, often relying instead on phenomenological resources to bridge the gap.

In our view, a cohesive post-cognitivist account of language must retain the analytic potential of conventionalist frameworks and the phenomenological grounding of perception. In having such an aim, we draw on a third path: one shaped by theories of epistemic justification in the Sellars-McDowell tradition and more broadly by Hegelian notions of normativity (see also Testa 2020). While this tradition and the Husserlian views may differ in their accounts of perceptual experience, they all affirm “a necessary connection between perceptual consciousness and self-consciousness, or between outer experience and self-experience” (Doyon 2015, 38).

Building on this framework, we propose that language, emotion, and norms are not independent domains loosely joined; they form an experiential unity and, thus, a cohesive situated account of normativity must begin with the embodied conditions of rational life. In this light, norms cannot be seen as merely social or cultural; they occur through our lived, perceptual involvement with the world. Here, *self-consciousness* becomes a foundational concept. Following Hegel, Pinkard writes: “We are self-conscious, self-interpreting animals [...] our status as *geistig*, as “minded” creatures is a status we “give” to ourselves in the sense that it is a practical achievement” (Pinkard 2012, 18). Thus, “to be an agent is to be able to assume a position in a kind of normative space, which, so it will turn out, is a kind of social and historical space” (Pinkard 2012, 7). This Hegelian notion of agency allows us to conceive of normativity in languaging and emotion as at once socially situated and rooted in the structures of embodied perception.

While the post-Hegelian tradition associated with Sellars, Brandom, and McDowell has been instrumental in mapping the *space of reasons* as a situated, socio-historical phenomenon (see Section 3), the role of affectivity has often remained a significant blind spot within these frameworks. Historically, this scholarship has focused on discursive reasoning and sensory perception as the primary modes of normative engagement. Sellars (2007) famously situated rational agency within the game of giving and asking for reasons, a model that Brandom (1994) later developed into a sophisticated account of linguistic scorekeeping. Even McDowell’s (1994) move to include receptivity and second nature within the space of reasons deals almost exclusively with sensory modalities, such as seeing colors or hearing sounds. Consequently, the affective life has frequently been sidelined, appearing as a pre-rational biological accompaniment rather than a constitutive feature of rational experience.

Our proposal suggests a radical extension of this tradition by arguing that the embodied perception grounding our rational life is, at its core, an affectively laden perception. We do not view affectivity or emotions as disruptions to the space of reasons, but as the very medium through which normative affordances become salient to us. Feeling is a way of tracking and responding to reasons that is no less minded than linguistic judgment. By integrating affectivity into the space of reasons, we aim to overcome the residual intellectualism that sometimes haunts post-cognitivist thought. This allows for a

³ To avoid confusion or overlap between frameworks, we adopt a broad notion of *norm*, from which more specific normative concepts (e.g., rule, prescription, judgment) can be derived. In this sense, norms, including linguistic ones, are understood as regulatory elements of human activity, encompassing “socially coordinated perception and experience” (Bartsch, 1987, 141). Their conventional status will be discussed throughout the article.

more cohesive understanding of how we inhabit a shared form of life: our perceptual involvement with the world is always a *felt* involvement, where norms are experienced as lived sensibilities rather than abstract rules.

2.4. Emotional variability in languages

The view developed so far stresses that normativity is inseparable from dynamic, affective, and socially situated practices. However, acknowledging this inseparability requires rethinking what we mean by “the social” itself. While incorporating linguistic norms within a social framework is essential, broadening our understanding of language exposes the limitations of narrow or partial conceptions of the social. What does this mean? A partial conception of the social refers to a body of thought that treats society as governed by its own autonomous logic, often in contrast to seemingly distinct domains like nature or biology (for critiques of such perspectives, see [Fracchia 2014](#); [Mau 2023](#); [Sinha 2024](#)). This framework tends to presuppose a transhistorical notion of human nature, isolating fields of study such as bodily perception and sensation from social conventions acquired through processes of acculturation. It similarly splits domains such as sensibility and understanding, or emotion and reason, along binary lines, which results in what can be described as an *interaction problem* ([Boyle 2016](#)) (see Section 3.3). If sociality and nature, or the mind and body, are treated as separate systems, how can we account for the ways they influence one another without introducing an explanatory gap?

Attempts to integrate bodily experience into discussions of social life often fall back on this very dualism, treating embodiment as an external factor to be “added” to cultural explanation or the other way around ([Batisti and Vidal, 2025](#)). In doing so, they maintain the social and the bodily as distinct, albeit connected, entities. As a result, sociality is often subordinated to a biological nature, leading to a portrayal of mindedness, rationality, and normative behavior as mere additions to an underlying ‘animalistic’ human nature. As we will argue, however, a unified account of normativity is possible, one that treats languaging, emotion, and cultural expressions as operating within the same normative space. Agents are embedded in a form of life in which they act, perceive, respond, and are held accountable ([Enfield and Sidnell, 2022](#)) across a spectrum of practices⁴, from perception to more sophisticated ways of interaction.

Given this framework, the variability of linguistic and emotional experience must be taken seriously. Norms do not merely reflect static universals; they are enacted, contested, and transformed across contexts. Even the most basic forms of perception and affectivity are responsive to reasons and are therefore open to justification, negotiation, and critique. To clarify this, following an example provided by an anonymous reviewer, consider the perception of a dog at close range. While it might seem that a ‘reason’ can only be offered for the *claim* that one sees a dog rather than for the *act* of seeing itself, this distinction relies on a separation between sensory input and conceptual capacity that we seek to bridge. In the framework developed here, following [McDowell \(1994\)](#), when an agent perceives an object, they are not merely “hit” by a sensory stimulus; rather, their conceptual capacities are already at work within their visual receptivity. To be responsive to reasons in this basic sense does not imply a process of conscious deliberation. Instead, it means that the perceptual experience itself is already structured in a way that stands in inferential relations. If what appeared to be a dog is later revealed to be a shadow, it is this inherent reason-responsiveness that allows the agent to negotiate, revise, or critique the initial perception. Thus, responsiveness to reasons is understood as a distinctively *rational* capacity that operates even at an *unreflective* level. Thus, we reject the claim that all embodied experience is fundamentally the same across cultures. Instead, we emphasize the openness and dynamic nature of cognition and emotion, where variability and transformation are not a deviation from normativity, but its core expressions.

Emotions are a prime example of the inseparability of bodily experience and sociality. The sociality—and embodiment—of affectivity does not depend on the presence of a social setting, nor is it merely the result of prior socialization. We prompt here a Hegelian perspective, in which sociality is the constitutive form of human mindedness itself. Even a “universal” feeling, such as the fear of hearing an unknown noise in the woods in solitude, is social insofar as it is an affective state of a creature whose world is conceptually and normatively structured. In a rational agent, there is no *outside* to the social. That dreadful fear felt in the woods is not a brute reflex, but a meaningful attunement to a world that is already intelligible through shared categories.

While we defend such an understanding, there is no consensus in affective sciences as for the nature of emotions. One influential perspective, the older and more widely accepted Basic Emotion Theory, tracing its roots in classical philosophy, further developed by Darwin and later refined by psychologists such as [Ekman \(1994, 1992, 1994\)](#), claims that a limited set of basic emotions exists (e.g., anger, fear, shame, happiness, etc.), though there is no consensus on the exact list. These are discrete, natural kinds shaped by biological evolution and therefore primitive, innate, and universal. On the other hand, the more recent Theory of Constructed Emotion, primarily associated with the work of Barrett and colleagues ([Barrett, 2017](#)), emphasizes the constructed nature of emotions, viewed as built from a complex and dynamic set of components and co-constructed through language and culture. Accordingly, psychologists supporting the constructionist view on emotions do not treat them as fixed entities but as inherently situational, individual, and culturally dependent (e.g., [Mesquita 2022](#); [Barrett and Lida, 2024](#); [Dukes and Sander, 2024](#); [Barrett et al., 2025](#); [Hoemann et al., 2025](#)).

⁴ By “practices” we understand the skilled, self-conscious exercise of an agent’s capacities, which are subject to norms of correctness and accountability within a specific form of life. We therefore maintain that the exercise of perceptual capacities is a practice in the sense that the perceiver is responsible for the ‘rightness’ of their engagement with the world.

While the constructionist approach to affectivity and emotional meaning sometimes risks reproducing a dualist framework in which relatively independent dimensions act or build upon one another, our account of variability remains closer to it. In this perspective, emotions are inherently situated and variable. They are developed and vary in relation to cultural practices and beliefs, grounded in multiple contexts (e.g. cognitive, embodied, communicative, historical) and assembled through continuous engagement with the physical, social, and linguistic environment. Crucially, emotions are ‘constructed’ and situated through a set of dynamic, transformative processes such as bodily resonance or somatization, physiological arousal (activation), appraisal (valence, evaluation), conceptualization, language, culture (see [Barrett, 2017](#)), and embodied affectivity and interaffectivity.

We acknowledge that the term ‘constructed’ may be understood as a description of how these various facets are integrated into a unified experience. However, we employ this characterization specifically to reject the notion of a ‘natural kind’ or a biological core that exists prior or independent to these processes. In this sense, ‘construction’ does not imply a mere gathering of components, but a constitutive assembly where the physiological and the social are so thoroughly fused that the emotion cannot be reduced to a pre-conceptual reflex.

Following [Fuchs \(2016\)](#), we understand embodied affectivity as the circular interaction between the embodied subject and the situation with its affective affordances, and interaffectivity as the process of coordinated interaction and mutual incorporation.

Compelling evidence of the variability of emotions comes from language, especially from emotional meaning. Indeed, affect and emotion play a pivotal role in language, not only in the lexicon but also in grammar and discourse (see [Foolen, 2016, 2016](#), [Majid 2012](#); [Soriano 2022](#) for overviews, the recent *Handbook* by [Schiewer et al. 2022–2023](#), and [Soares da Silva's 2025](#) discussion of [Wiltschko 2024](#)). Beyond the conceptualization of emotions through diverse linguistic categories and the extensive and nuanced linguistic expression of emotions, the desire to share emotions with others is one of the preconditions for language itself, and one of the key drivers of the cooperative character of human communication ([Tomassello 2008](#)). Additionally, all components of emotional meaning are sensitive to social, individual, and cultural variation. These components include bodily resonance, arousal, appraisal, power (strength, control), expression (perceptible/internalized), attention (aspects of experience salient at a given moment), and perspectivization (the ‘subjects’ perspective of conceptualization from which events are viewed) (see [Kövecses 2000](#); [Fontaine et al., 2013](#); [Hoemann et al., 2025](#); [Soares da Silva 2025](#)). Two fundamental cognitive mechanisms by which emotional experience enter language and meaning, and through which language and meaning enter emotional experience, are construal and figurativity.

As a cover term proposed by [Langacker \(2008, 43\)](#) for designating our ability to conceive and portray the same situation in alternate ways, *construal* – encompassing attention, perspectivization, (inter)subjectification, and figurativity – constitutes a fundamental component of any linguistic meaning and is the “essential import” of grammatical meaning ([Langacker 2008, 4](#)). An emotional experience can be conceptually represented as a ‘thing,’ a ‘process,’ or a ‘relation’ by virtue of its grammatical construal as noun, verb, and adjective/adverb, respectively. Some languages, such as English or Dutch, favor nouns and adjectives for the representation of emotion, thus profiling the Experiencer and construing emotions as individual inner states (below, in Section 4.1, we counter this internalist construal). By contrast, other languages, such as Russian or Chinese, preferentially construe emotions as verbs, profiling procedural and interpersonal relationships and construing emotions as processes. According to [Semin et al. \(2002\)](#), individualistic cultures are more likely to use nouns/adjectives because they foreground the individual, whereas collectivistic cultures would favor verbs in order to profile emotions as interpersonal phenomena. Grammatical construal also allows alternate experiencer constructions to convey whether the emotion is controllable, (un)wanted, externally caused or self-generated. The grammatical encoding of the emotional causal event in Indo-European languages allows variation between Stimulus-as-subject and Experiencer-as-subject. By contrast, Chinese allows for a third possibility of grammatical subject orientation, namely Affecter-as-subject. In turn, figurativity, especially conceptual metaphor and metonymy, has a strong impact on emotional meaning (more overtly in the lexicon but also present in grammar), and thus on the sociocultural situatedness and variability of emotional experiences (see [Kövecses 2000](#); [Soares da Silva 2021](#)). We conceptualize emotions through their effects, construing them metaphorically as forces that affect us and metonymically through their results on our body and behavior. This emotional metaphorical-metonymic continuum is open to great cultural variation.

One of the key ways in which culture is expressed in emotions relates to the opposition between individualism and collectivism ([Hofstede 2001](#)). Although both orientations are present in every society, it is argued that in some individualism predominates, while in others collectivism is more dominant. In the former, people tend to perceive themselves as individual, autonomous entities with personal goals and achievements; in the latter, people are expected not to be independent from one another, but to harmoniously integrate into the societal organization of roles and duties. Other cultural dimensions that shape emotions and determine their variability include power distance (the degree to which social inequality is tolerated), indulgence (the extent to which people attempt to control their desires and impulses), honor, and religion. Most studies exploring the role of culture in the conceptualization of emotions have emphasized comparisons between (highly) dissimilar and geographically distant languages and cultures (e.g., [Matsumoto et al., 2010](#); [Ogarkova and Soriano, 2014](#) on anger). However, cultural variability in emotions also occurs intra-linguistically, between varieties of the same language (see [Soares da Silva 2020, 2021, 2022](#) for a case in point between European and Brazilian Portuguese).

In sum, emotions and linguistic meaning emerge within the same normative space, as variable, dynamic and culturally embedded process. Concepts such as embodied affectivity and interaffectivity highlight the coordination between agents and environment, leaving behind the idea of the body as a passive substrate of emotions. At the same time, through

construal and figurativity, languages provide diverse conceptual and grammatical means for expressing emotions, while cultural tendencies such as individualism, collectivism, power relations, and values of honor or religion further enrich the complex experience of sensibility. Taken together, these perspectives point to the need for an understanding of both normativity and emotion as living open practices⁵ enacted through bodily resonance, intersubjective engagement, and cultural expression. In a unifying attempt, linguistic feeling seeks to encompass such viewpoints.

3. Normativity revisited

This section advances an account of normativity that rejects the separation of social and embodied dimensions, viewing them instead as expressions of a unified, situated form of life. Through the lens of linguistic feeling, we see how body, emotion, and norm manifest together in the activity of languaging. As anticipated in the previous section, emotions, in this view, are not mere adaptive responses to socially constructed norms, but are integral to our ability to be norm-governed agents. As Pinkard states:

To be an agent is to be an organic human animal who has a normative status conferred on her that she must then sustain through her own acts. As an agent moves around in this social space and learns to negotiate it, she also commits herself to making sense of what she is doing, and that involves giving and asking for reasons from others moving around in that social space. (Pinkard 2012, 8).

Accordingly, emotions are neither pre-rational impulses nor purely reactive states; rather, as crystallizations of our broader affectivity, they are forms of evaluative perception. At this juncture, it is crucial to distinguish between *discrete emotions* (such as fear or anger) and *affectivity* (the continuous, valenced bodily attunement to our environment). We do not claim that every perceptual encounter triggers a full-blown, discrete emotion. An agent might perceive an animal at close range without experiencing distinct fear or joy. However, in a post-cognitivist framework, this absence of a heightened emotional response is not a 'neutral,' purely mechanical registration of data. Rather, it is structured by a baseline affective state, such as a sense of familiarity, safety, or low-arousal indifference. Inversely, perception is inherently affective as well, as Dreon (2022, 37), drawing on the classical pragmatists, states: "purely descriptive or nonevaluative sensory perception should be reframed as an analytic abstraction". Drawing on Freeman (2000) and Barrett and Bar (2009), Colombetti (2018) also explains that perception is modulated by the organism's expectations, physiological arousal, and affective state, contributing to the formation of affect-laden visual percepts. In this sense, emotions possess intentional content and are thus inherently reason-laden, as exemplified by the notions of construal and figurativity in Section 2.4. When experiencing emotions such as anger or sadness, the feeling is inseparable from the reasons that give rise to them. To the extent that sensibility is connected to intentionality, it enables us to discern what is better or worse in practical situations. To understand the value of linguistic feeling, we must first explore whether—and how—sensibility can have or confer a normative status (see also Siewert 2015 for a similar enterprise).

As elaborated in Section 2.4, we do not regard rationality as an acquired trait of an otherwise indeterminate animal, nor do we consider norms to be an added layer to a natural environment. While it is inevitable to speak of norms when speaking of language, certain theoretical approaches closer to an idea of language as a conventional system emphasize that meaning is exclusively grounded in intersubjective rule-following and shared conventions (Itkonen 2019). In doing so, these conventionalist theories explicitly reject cognitive or naturalistic perspectives on language. For example, Itkonen asserts: "a mistake can be recognized for what it is only on the basis of public or intersubjective criteria, and there are no such criteria for the occurrence of mental scanning or for mental imagery in general" (Itkonen 2019, 44). While it is true that branches of linguistics such as first-generation Cognitive Linguistics may inherit generativist commitments to methodological individualism and mentalism (see Batisti and Vidal, 2025), the attempt to exclude cognition from an account of normativity in language risks reifying languaging as an autonomous and idealized system. This, in turn, situates norms above and beyond actual linguistic activity. To avoid isolating language within a narrow social sphere, we argue for a reconnection between norms and broader cognitive capacities such as perception, affectivity, and our ecological embeddedness.

Rather than treating norms as mere epiphenomena of social behavior, we deem them foundational to our embodied experience of the world. In this regard, we follow McDowell's account of mindedness:

We should not start with the assumption that mindedness, the characteristic in virtue of which I am the thinking thing I am, is alien to unreflective immersion in bodily life. If we let our conception of mindedness be controlled by the thought that mindedness is operative even in our unreflective perceiving and acting, we can regain an integrated conception of ourselves, as animals, and—what comes with that—beings whose life is pervasively bodily, but of a distinctively rational kind. (McDowell 2007: 369–370)

⁵ A reviewer objects that the standard view entails that emotion can arise during practices, and that norms are what guide the latter. Let us try to be clearer: by saying that normativity and emotions are practices we point to the fact that normativity is inscribed in praxis, rather than guide it from outside, as if it were neatly separated, and to the intrinsically affective nature of our engagement with the world. On those definitions, a synthetic formulation like the one used here is consequential.

However, within linguistics, norms have traditionally been examined through the lens of ‘social intuition’: the idea that our grasp of normative content is not based on sensory perception, but on shared conventions (Mäkilähde et al., 2019). This social revival in the language sciences has been both productive and necessary. Nevertheless, as we have suggested, any understanding of the social that overlooks perceptual or bodily dimensions of rationality as constitutive –rather than merely influential– remains necessarily incomplete. Such an approach inevitably demands an explanation of how a normative dimension can exist independently of the broader cognitive embodied experience or how any perception can be generalizable beyond individual and situational experiences. Questions regarding how meaning emerges are left to behavioral patterns, rendering it entirely immanent to convention to the point where language becomes a closed resonance chamber, incapable of genuine openness or responsiveness to the world. By contrast, a more integrative linguistic approach understands affectivity and emotion not as marginal or passive elements of an embodied dimension but as inherently normative as well, shaping and shaped by the practices in which agents are held accountable.

3.1. Linguistic activity as self-conscious activity

Rejecting the idea that norms are statistical regularities, externally acquired rules or solely pertaining to public criteria, we propose a constitutive account of normativity. Norms, in the sense we are concerned with, are not reducible to empirical generalizations. Treating them as such reduces normative explanation to mere norm description. These norms are neither imposed from without in the form of cultural rules one must follow; instead, our proposal stems from the idea that norms are enabling conditions for participation in meaningful practices. Sensibility is central in this regard. One may choose to suppress an emotion or to refuse to engage with another’s affective display, but such refusals carry normative weight. They risk disconnection from the shared evaluative structures that undergird a certain form of life, and may be met with social sanction. Such structures may also stem from cultural variation, where particular practices foreground some emotional expressions (e.g. honor, pride) as central to communal life, while others may downplay them (Soares da Silva 2020, 2021, 2022). Thus, emotional behavior is not only subject to norms; it plays an active role in instituting and maintaining them. For instance, the expression of indignation in response to an act of unfairness does not merely report a violation of a pre-existing rule. The affective display itself institutes the norm of fairness in the moment of interaction, making the standard authoritative for both the agent and the observer. By making the violation affectively salient, the agent holds the community to a shared standard, thereby actively maintaining the normative fabric of the form of life. Without such affective ‘taking-up’ of norms, these standards would remain abstract regularities rather than lived, enabling conditions for participation.

These linguistic and emotional norms do not merely function as part of a higher order system that imposes on the individual but as the conditions of intelligibility of any activity one is engaging in. While certain rules can indeed be taught and enforced overtly, as when a teacher corrects a student’s grammar⁶, these prescriptive acts build upon an implicit sense of normativity that enables our capacity to speak, feel, and reason. This view draws on a broadly Hegelian framework, in which human activity – like speaking – is always a form of *self-consciousness* (Suther 2023). To speak is to understand oneself as a speaker, participating in a rule-governed practice. This form of consciousness is not observational: I do not conclude that I am speaking by perceiving myself doing so, nor is this “I” another object in my sensory experience. Rather, I can only be conscious of myself speaking by *being* the speaker. That is, I know I am speaking because I *am* doing so within the normative horizon of what meaningfully counts as *speaking*. Thus, to speak well or poorly is not simply judged publicly, as when a teacher corrects my grammar; these assessments are possible because the norms are first constitutive to the practice of speaking itself. The same formulation of the problem with the example of *walking* can be found in Suther (2024):

“they [rules] are instead understood by Hegel as *constitutive of the activity itself*. It is for this reason that, inversely, I can only be a walker by being *conscious* of myself as one. I *take myself* to be bound by such rules, which dictate not what I *will* do but what I *ought* to do or have *reason* to do. In failing to put one foot in front of the other or in failing to pay attention to obstacles in front of me, I do not contradict an external scorekeeper; I am contradicting *myself*.” (Suther 2024, para. 17)

On this account, self-consciousness is not a detached observation of oneself, nor does it require the agent to possess a reflective, theoretical concept of their identity (e.g., ‘I am a walker’). Furthermore, this form of agency does not depend on occupying a formal role, such as that of a soldier. Admittedly, wearing a uniform or exercising military expertise cannot be rendered intelligible without the agent’s explicit grasp of the concept ‘soldier’ and the social obligations it entails. However, in a Hegelian framework, we must distinguish between such explicit theoretical reflection and *practical self-consciousness*. While one does not need to master the discursive concept of a walker to walk, the activity itself remains conceptually and normatively structured.

For a rational agent, ‘paying attention’ to where one places the foot is not a blind, biological reflex; it is the practical exercise of rational capacities. The agent unreflectively grasps the terrain as providing *reasons* to adjust their step, thereby holding themselves to the immanent norms of the activity, such as maintaining balance or a specific pace. In this sense, even a

⁶ For the sake of the argument, we use an example of a prescriptive type of rule, while we acknowledge that *norm* and *prescription* should not be so easily conflated.

non-institutional activity like walking is a normative achievement. If the agent trips because they failed to pay attention, they do not violate an institutional rule, but they do fail by the standard of their own practical intention. The 'I' that speaks or walks is not a passive recipient of rules, but an agent bound by the logic and obligations constitutive of the activity itself. Whether the norm is cultural-institutional or immanent to the movement, the agent's responsiveness to it is what marks the action as distinctively human.

To be a speaker, then, is to recognize oneself as accountable within a *space of reasons* (Sellars 2007); reasons that do not prescribe outcomes, but make certain courses of action intelligible or justifiable. In this same space, emotions are not simply expressed; they are formed, mediated, and assessed. Linguaging informs how we feel, how we are expected to react, what counts as an appropriate emotional response, and even what concepts we possess for articulating affective life, proving that sensibility and language are deeply co-constituted in action (Dreon 2022).

A norm is a principle which guides how one 'ought' to act or judge in a given context. Even in a simple utterance such as 'The table is brown', several layers of normativity are at work, including a more conventional set of rules such as shared understanding of what counts as a table, socially accepted color categories, and context-sensitive standards for when such a statement is appropriate. But this framework invites a deeper question: can the perception of the table itself, its color, shape, or presence, be normative?

3.2. Norms as conditions for rational experience

At first glance, sensory experience seems to just *happen* to us. It appears passive, brute, and pre-conceptual, something that cannot be true or false, justified or contested. On this view, normativity belongs strictly to the domain of reason, not sensation. However, philosophers in the tradition of McDowell (1994) challenge this dichotomy. For McDowell, as we mentioned before, all experience is already structured by conceptual capacities. Perception is not a raw input later processed by reason; it is a *space* in which rationality is already operative. Thus, when I perceive a table as brown, I am not passively registering an undefined sensory stimulus. I perceive something as something that is, in a way, already imbued with conceptual structure. As McDowell puts it, "[a] judgment of experience does not introduce a new kind of content, but simply endorses the conceptual content, or some of it, that is already possessed by the experience on which it is grounded." (McDowell 1994: 48–49).

Why is this account relevant for our approach to languaging, sensibility, and normativity? Our aim is to state that normativity can be explained at the level of perception, that is, our situated, embodied experience, through the space of reasons. On this view, the social dimension of language is not denied, but it becomes intelligible in light of our responsiveness to reasons, that is, "being able practically to place it [a concept] in a network of inferential relations: to know what is evidence for or against its being properly applied to a particular case, and what its proper applicability to a particular case counts as evidence for or against" (Brandom 2001: 82). In turn, the conceptual capacities involved here are not reducible to linguistic convention or shared public criteria. They constitute the very possibility of perceptual knowledge as such. Without these normatively governed capacities, one could not commit to the idea that what is perceived is, say, a brown table and not something else. To see a brown table as a brown table involves taking up a stance toward how the world ought to be. That is, perceptual experience itself carries normative implications.

This normative understanding of perception aligns with McDowell's broader project of resisting what Boyle (2016) calls *additive theories* of rationality, which treat perception as a shared, sub-rational capacity of all animals and treat reason as a human-specific *additional* cognitive layer that evaluates or monitors it. Against this, Boyle argues:

[O]ur rationality does make a basic difference to the nature of our perceiving: it gives us a 'special form' of perceptual sensitivity to our environment, one whose operations are themselves informed by our capacity to weigh reasons. If this is right, then our power to acquire knowledge from perception cannot be accounted for in an additive framework. For if what 'perception' signifies in the case of rational creatures cannot be explained without reference to the capacity for rational reflection, then rational perceiving cannot be explained as perceiving supplemented by the further power to monitor and regulate this activity in the light of reasoning. Rather, an account of our sort of perceiving must itself appeal to capacities connected with rational thought and judgement. (Boyle 2016, 530)

In the enactivist tradition, a similar concern is raised by Boncompagni (2020), who critiques the autopoietic commitment to normativity in minimal forms of life. According to this view, even bacteria, by exhibiting adaptive behavior, can be said to act in a norm-governed manner. This implies a continuity of normativity across all living systems, from microorganisms to fully-fledged linguistic agents. While the aim of preserving biological continuity is central to many naturalistic approaches, we argue that such a broad application of normativity risks diluting its conceptual force. As Boncompagni warns, "the risk in this approach is that it might suggest that 'high-level' normativity is based on, and therefore can be explained by reference to, 'low-level' normativity" (2020: 183), thereby reinstating an additive view of the mind. In contrast, we maintain that normativity only becomes a fruitful concept when understood in relation to rationality. The distinction between rational and non-rational beings, while continuous in an evolutionary sense, is not a difference of degree but of kind, necessarily implying a transformative moment in human life: when shared animal capacities become rational capacities. This qualitative shift is what McDowell calls the acquisition of a *second nature* (1994), that is, the capacity to inhabit the space of reasons.

To perceive, or to act, then, is to take a stance, to adopt a perspective that is implicitly and rationally committed to the world being a certain way. As in the act of speaking or walking noted before, a parallel structure is found in perceptual judgment. In asserting “*The table is brown*”, I am implicitly assigning an *I* to my sensory experience: “*I think the table is brown*”. This reflexive structure reveals a form of self-consciousness as well (Rödl 2018). It is through this self-ascription of perceptual content that we engage in judgment, and thus, enter the space of reasons. As Rödl puts it:

In judging that things are so, I think it correct so to judge. I do not, in one act of the mind, judge that things are so and, in a second act, think my judgment valid. Rather, judging that things are so is taking it to be right to judge that they are. Judgment returns to itself. Thinking that something is so is being conscious of the validity of thinking this. We may put this by saying that a judgment is self-consciously valid. (Rödl 2018, 4)

The norm that renders my judgment about the brown table valid is not externally imposed by social convention alone; it is constitutive of my own rationality. This does not imply an individualistic commitment to perception. On the contrary, the “*I think*” rooted in perception is, at the same time, deeply social; it necessarily presupposes the possibility of a “*You think*”, and thus of disagreement and accountability. Norms, then, are not reducible to behavioral regularities nor external public criteria. They are conditions for the possibility of rational experience.⁷

Such experience is *enlanguaged* too, as the social space is navigated by giving and asking for reasons and, as Dreon (2022, 144ff.) proposes, in that our linguistic activities contribute to configuring it:

Linguistic practices in concrete existential situations are considered to play a structural role in the shaping of typically human forms of life [...] [They] are an integral part of the human experience of the world [...] Conversely, human experience, which is to say humans’ interactions with their natural and naturally social environment, find themselves contingently, if irreversibly, embedded from each person’s birth within contexts made up of linguistic practices, more or less meaningful relations, and questions and answers that contribute to continuously redefining what happens. (Dreon 2022, 144–5)

Language is only rarely, if ever, encountered in its “pure form — whatever this might mean”; instead, it is “part of the thick fabric of our experience” (145). This is the case, Dreon admonishes, for a mere accident of the evolutionary history of our species, and it would be a mistake to consider language a (quasi-)transcendental condition of possibility for human experience altogether. Having clarified this, one can still emphasize how human forms of life are (contingently and yet crucially) so affected by the linguistic ways of sharing a physical and socio-cultural environment (Dreon 2022, 148).

4. Linguistic feeling: a case in point

We now turn to *linguistic feeling*, a concept that has recently regained attention within the language sciences and that, we argue, can serve two functions for our argument. On one side, the fact that this hard-to-grasp notion was thematized repeatedly throughout the history of Western reflection on language indicates a value to the assumption that language and normativity are, indeed, affective. On the other hand, on the basis of the revised definition of normativity advanced so far, we believe that *linguistic feeling* could be rethought once more in a way that integrates it within a wider operation of building a post-cognitivist comprehensive view of language (Batisti and Vidal, 2025).

Before exploring the issue in greater detail, let us explain its relevance for the present discussion. Although one could argue that this somewhat historically unstable analytical label should be considered a rather specific and limited phenomenon within the broader notion of affectivity and languaging, we find it useful to connect the tenets we have outlined so far: a situated account of languaging and affectivity (sec. 2), an understanding of cognition as intrinsically affective (sec. 3), a definition of normativity as constitutive of embodied experience (sec. 4), and an account of social variation of emotion and language (sec. 5).

Such four tenets are needed to properly understand a phenomenon such as linguistic feeling in a situated approach. The latter aims at avoiding dualisms, as the ones classic cognitive science as well as some additive theories of rationality endorse. This, indeed, is a risk that some branches of post-cognitivism may still fall into. On these premises, linguistic feeling allows us to work within a cohesive background that comprises normativity, affectivity, and languaging.

As Romand (2023, 4) thoroughly reconstructs, there has been substantial fluctuation in the terminology in the last couple of centuries “to refer to the subject’s capacity to intuitively apprehend language normativity”. Although expressions like *Sprachgefühl*, *sentiment de la langue*, or (meta)linguistic intuition have been widely used, we too are settling for “linguistic feeling”, contributing to the effort of normalizing its use in academic English. Despite the plural understanding of the concept, an overarching definition is possible:

⁷ Although we have no space to properly introduce it, our discussion relates to the Dreyfus-McDowell disagreement on whether skilled performance is mindless or not, as Gallagher (2017, 197–204) reconstructs. Readers familiar with it could be somewhat surprised by our use of McDowell’s ideas in a context that is highly sympathetic to enactivist views, whereas it is usually Dreyfus the one being considered a forerunner of enaction. Our view, for that matter, is closer to Gallagher’s own, who proposed a third way. At the same time, the use we make of McDowell’s work should be considered limited in its scope, namely, redefining normativity through acknowledging its presence in perceptual and cognitive activity.

the subjective capacity to apprehend language normativity, by spontaneously deciding on whether the linguistic properties that you are perceiving are either compliant or noncompliant with the theoretical knowledge that you, as a member of a definite linguistic community, are supposed to have about language (Romand 2023, 1)

Linguistic feeling, according to the twentieth-century discussion, occupies a problematic spot⁸ at the intersection between the poles of emotion and cognition, awareness and unconsciousness, as well as its relation to explicit norms (Unterberg 2023, 77–78). We do not regard this positioning that defies dualisms as problematic, but rather as fertile. Linguistic feeling is indeed a simultaneously emotional-cognitive-normative phenomenon – where norms are not limited or reducible to the public kind.

Romand (2023, 42) advances the view that linguistic feeling should be regarded as a *psychoaffective* activity, that is, “a psychological phenomenon that shares the ontological/functional properties of emotions and cognate mental states”, highlighting how, ironically, the “feeling” leg of ‘linguistic feeling’ “often appears as a rather unproblematic notion” that has been overlooked throughout history. That appears to be the case even by the early twentieth century, when there was, somewhat surprisingly, a lack of connection between linguists who addressed linguistic feeling and what psychologists had to say about *feeling*. As a result, the linguistic feeling remained a “psychologically poorly defined notion” (44). Kainz (1956), for example, explicitly denied the status of emotion proper to linguistic feeling, conceding a mere secondary and derived emotional content to it. Gauger and Oesterreicher (1982) and Henne (1982) maintained the spurious nature, appealing to its closeness to a form of cognition, rather than sensation/feeling⁹. Only recently, the common interpretation started to be challenged (e.g. Fiehler 2014), also thanks to new attention to the wider category of *epistemic feelings*¹⁰, where the dimension of knowledge and emotion are taken to coexist.

We will review Fiehler’s and Romand’s positions in this respect, eventually, to offer a post-cognitivist critique. Namely, we will show that a further step could be made towards overcoming remnants of internalist and individualist conceptions of emotions.

4.1. Overcoming internalism

Romand appreciates Fiehler’s claim that linguistic feeling qualifies as an emotion and criticizes his failure to “thematize the idea that linguistic feeling may consist of the manifestation of epistemic feelings” (49). Let us first focus on Fiehler’s (2014, 38–39) three criteria supporting his claim: (1) being a form of “inner experience” [*inneren Erlebens*], (2) being an involuntary and somewhat automatized reaction, (3) having an evaluative character (i.e., the feeling tends to be either positive or negative). For the present scope, our attention is going to be directed towards the first characterization of emotions as inner experiences. An internalist framing is also being adopted when Fiehler describes linguistic feeling as a “mental monitoring process”, that is, a process of “registration” of an input coming from the outside that is processed internally within the mind and results in observable behavior (attitudes evolving into dispositions). As an anonymous reviewer suggests, it is worth noting that the very concept of ‘mental monitoring’ remains theoretically obscure, often serving as a contemporary rebranding of the problematic ‘inner sense’, though a full critique of this cognitive model lies beyond the scope of the present paper.

We argue that the implied inner-outer divide will prove to be a more problematic position than is usually assumed. Therefore, to have it as the backbone of theories directed at other particular issues (emotions, in this case) could seriously endanger any such theory. In other words, what we see at work in the study of linguistic feeling is but one of the many incarnations of a much wider philosophical issue, influentially thematized by Descartes in the Seventeenth century. For this reason, we will deliver our objection to internalist readings of linguistic feeling by dismantling the massive intellectual scaffolding supporting said core dualist assumption.

The presence of which is not surprising at all, being largely widespread in our everyday talk, “particularly when it comes to feelings, emotions, thoughts, intentions, etc.” (Perissinotto 2022, 262). It is usually accompanied by other cognate images, such as “the private-public divide and the mental-physical (bodily) divide” (*ibid.*). It eventually leads to grouping opposed conceptual triads like “internal, private and mental” vis-à-vis “external, public and physical (corporeal)”. Focusing on emotions and feelings (a generic definition of these terms is sufficient here), a well-known argument offered by Wittgenstein (2009) consists in realizing that the specific features of the ordinary language we speak many times lure us into assuming the actual existence of distinctions, entities, or relations, whereas the ultimately contingent and messy nature of natural languages should not be automatically (if ever) taken as a guide to ontology.

⁸ Consider, among many other, this reconstruction: “Over the course of about a century, the corresponding notion [*Sprachgefühl*] established itself, so to speak, as an operative concept which, without really being theorized and without becoming an autonomous subject, was integrated into the theoretical framework of the linguistic research of the time [viz. nineteenth century]” (Romand 2023, 6).

⁹ In Romand (2023, 47) some illustrative quotes are reported: Henne (1982, 132): “Linguistic feeling is not a feeling in the sense of the physiological and psychological concepts (e.g., subjective arousals of the limbic systems); rather, linguistic feeling is a vague but reliable cognizance of linguistic experience that works like a feeling”; Gauger and Oesterreicher (1982, 44): “we are actually not dealing with a feeling, with a kind of phenomenon that used to be called a ‘feeling’; rather, we are dealing with a kind of cognizance [*Wissen*] about the correctness or appropriateness of definite linguistic forms.”

¹⁰ Epistemic feelings include “feelings of familiarity, knowledge, belief, confidence, doubt, confusion, curiosity, agency, ownership” (Dietrich et al., 2020). As such, they are usually considered distinct from emotions in general and from epistemic emotions in detail.

If I say that I am having, or feeling, a pain (a stomachache, for instance), what an interlocutor will do is look at my overall behavior (grunting, avoidance of food, looking for medicine, etc.). The feeling of pain could be said to be, in a way, equivalent to all these possible actions on my part. What is meant by the ‘privacy’ of emotions and feelings is something along the lines of “nobody can know them unless I show them” (Wittgenstein 1993a, 447). The unwarranted passage is, however, the one towards metaphysics. If we really lived by the image of the inaccessibility of ‘inner feelings’, we would behave very differently on an everyday basis. Namely, we would be constantly putting up with this sort of radical skepticism on whether other people are faking it, that is, displaying pain-related behavior without the pain. But

[i]n saying that I cannot know what you feel, I am acknowledging how difficult it is for me to understand you, and I may be inviting you perhaps to be more spontaneous and sincere with me. What Wittgenstein wants us to admit in any case is that this difficulty is not a «metaphysical» or «metapsychological» difficulty (*ibidem*, 208), so to speak, and to recognise that by saying «I cannot know what you feel» I am not ultimately making «a statement [...] about the nature of things» (*ibidem*, 209) (Perissinotto 2022, 264)

While it is true that many times others do surprise us and we genuinely have a hard time understanding their actions – including feelings, emotions, but also desires, thoughts, etc. – our difficulty in making sense of them is not *explained* by the inner-outer divide: it is not *because* we cannot access the supposedly super-private emotion inside their head that we do not understand what they did or said, just as much when we do understand them is certainly not because we somehow managed to break the privacy of the feeling. In Wittgenstein’s words:

«We see emotion». As opposed to what? – We do not see facial contortions and make inferences from them (like a doctor framing a diagnosis) to joy, grief, boredom. We describe a face immediately as sad, radiant, bored, even when we are unable to give any other description of the features. – Grief, one would like to say, is personified in the face (Wittgenstein 1967, § 225).

Thus, assuming the metaphysical reality of an inner-outer divide creates misunderstandings when taken out of the ordinary context and leads to pseudo-problems for the philosopher. It is important to clarify – as Wittgenstein himself felt the need to do – that by this grammatical clarification he is not necessarily endorsing a behaviorist position in psychology. Besides the fact that such a claim would be profoundly alien to Wittgenstein’s way of philosophizing and to his conception of the relationship between philosophy and the sciences, he points out that his rejection concerns rather “the grammar which tends to force itself on us here” (*PI*, § 304). The fact that ‘stomachache’ or ‘pain’ are nouns in English leads to “the inescapable conclusion [...] that pain (what the word ‘pain’ means) is an essentially internal and private object, detached from the rest of our life” (Perissinotto 2022, 267). More generally, the dualist is making the error of predicating “of the thing what lies in the mode of representation” (Wittgenstein 2009, § 104), which amounts to contingent grammatical forms (nouns, verbs, etc.) of a given language. In those, ultimately, we should not expect to find ‘theories’, or indications on how to reach them, but merely ‘pictures’, that is, similes, metaphors, and the like.

Acknowledging that the very idea of an ‘inner feeling’ should be resisted, at least while trying to better understand a human phenomenon like linguistic feeling, let us now proceed to provide an alternative account that does not assume an inner-outer dichotomy. In what sense can one claim that linguistic feeling is not an internal phenomenon as much as it is external?

4.2. The felt dimension of linguistic normativity

Following the German tradition of approaching linguistic intuition through the more nuanced notion of linguistic feeling (*Sprachgefühl*) provides a way to address the affective dimension of normativity without relying on generativist assumptions. As Romand points out, “[T]heorists of linguistic intuitions advocate an ahistorical and American-centered approach to the issues at stake, which has led them to completely disregard the other existing contributions to the domain” (Romand 2023, 12). In this sense, rather than directly resolving questions about the methodological value of intuition in linguistic analysis, *Sprachgefühl* reframes these concerns by shifting the focus to the affective and experiential dimensions that constitute intuition. This approach, in turn, aligns with post-cognitivist perspectives on language.

As we have been arguing, a set of dualisms persists in the notion of linguistic feeling that we aim to overcome, particularly in relation to internalism and individualism. These dualisms appear, for instance, in the treatment of emotion and intuition through the lens of the inner-outer divide. Linguistic intuition is often conceived as a capacity that an individual of a linguistic community possesses as a result of the internalization of socially shared rules. Normativity, on this view, is construed as a two-sided phenomenon: first, a psychological act by which the individual internalizes rules as mental entities; second, the validation of those rules by appeal to shared common knowledge, where rules themselves determine what counts as correct or incorrect (Mäkilähde et al., 2019). But this explanatory model reintroduces an interaction problem: “If the two realms are intrinsically independent of one another, how can a change in one necessitate a change in the other?” (Boyle 2016, 536). If rules are reified as external social ‘entities’ that autonomously dictate correctness, the individual is falsely reduced to a passive recipient. Detached from the normative space in which those rules operate, this view ignores that mastering a rule is not the internalization of an object, but a capacity that inherently requires the active exercise of judgment. Even if one emphasizes that such rules only acquire normative force through individual uptake, the interaction problem remains unresolved. This view fails to explain how it is possible that individuals *have* reasons for them

to believe that any linguistic activity is thus-and-so; how they come to experience the world, or linguistic activity, as making sense or calling for a response.

In an effort to avoid such dualisms, we now return to the German tradition, particularly Herder's (1966) insight that language is necessarily grounded in sensibility. Herder conceived *Sprachgefühl* as a bodily, affective openness underlying language from its origins to its reflective use (Romand 2023). He emphasized the immediacy of feeling as that which enables sensory modalities to be translated into words, and saw this affective dimension as immanent in all linguistic development at all ages. Herder's idea of feeling as a primary, encompassing bodily experience provides a path toward rethinking the role of affectivity in what has traditionally been called linguistic intuition within accounts of linguistic normativity. This opens the way to reinterpret linguistic feeling through Peirce's category of Firstness, as the felt immediacy¹¹ that precedes and undergirds more articulated forms of judgment.

Although Peirce's categories belong to a broader metaphysical and semiotic framework, they provide valuable tools for addressing the connection between affect and normativity. In his triadic schema of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, each category relates to a mode of being and to specific semiotic functions. These categories are not absolute or self-standing, but interdependent and hierarchical and in ongoing transformation. For our purposes, we focus on Firstness, which Peirce identifies with the "first" mode of experience: pure quality, possibility, or feeling. It is what presents itself to consciousness *as such*, before it is mediated by reaction (Secondness) or generality (Thirdness). As Peirce explains:

When anything is present to the mind, what is the very first and simplest character to be noted in it, in every case, no matter how little elevated the object may be? [...] Certainly, it is its presentness. [...] Such a consciousness might be just an odor, say a smell of attar; or it might be one infinite dead ache; it might be the hearing of a piercing eternal whistle. In short, any simple and positive quality of feeling would be something which our description fits, —that it is such as it is quite regardless of anything else. (Peirce 1998 [2:150]).

This mode of being, Firstness, is notoriously difficult to reflect upon directly since reflection itself already involves Thirdness, the realm of generality and mediation (McNabb 2018). Nonetheless, Peirce holds that even the most structured elements of meaning, such as rules or judgments, must include an irreducible moment of Firstness. In this light, *feeling* is not an epiphenomenon of meaning but part of its very constitution.

In his more anthropological semiotic account, Peirce also distinguishes three kinds of interpretants or effects a sign can produce: emotional, energetic, and logical, each of them corresponding to the base categories. The emotional interpretant is the felt qualitative response that arises first in experience. "The first proper significate effect of a sign is a feeling produced by it" (Peirce 1935 [CP: 5475]). Lator (1997) elaborates that it

is the minimal phenomenologically noticeable modification of consciousness. [...] we ought to take 'first effect' here as a more or less vaguely delimited 'segment' of continuous sign-interpretation, beginning with the unanalyzed sign and ending with a feeling of recognition of the sign [...] This segment of continuous sign activity, of various operations, comprises a single emotional interpretant. (para 15).

It is crucial to distinguish this Peircean notion of 'feeling' from a mere psychological sensation or secondary accompaniment to words. In line with his rigorous anti-psychologism, Peirce's Firstness, and our conception of linguistic feeling, does not denote a separate psychological event that is 'added' to a word, but an objective *phaneroscopic* mode of being. While Peirce defines the *phaneron* as all that is "present to the mind" (CP 1.284), he clarifies that this is a formal description of the structure of appearance, not an empirical study of mental mechanisms. In his framework, *phaneroscopy* functions as a categorical analysis of the 'what' of experience, focusing on the structural features of signs as they appear, which remains distinct from the empirical study of the nervous system's functional mechanisms. Thus, linguistic feeling refers to the primary qualitative attunement to a normative environment. It is the immediate, unreflective grasp of a situation's valence.¹²

¹¹ When speaking of immediacy here, we do not imply non-conceptual content in McDowell's sense. Conceptual capacities are already operative when a quality is grasped. Against empiricist accounts, perceiving a quality such as the brownness of a table is not a matter of passive sensory impression, but may involve the habitual abstraction of recurring encounters with brown objects, which acts upon our experience. In this respect, one might even argue that such qualia, insofar as they are structured by habits, no longer belong to Firstness. Our appeal to Firstness is not to posit a raw Given outside conceptual space, but to emphasize the felt immediacy through which norms become experientially salient.

¹² There is a consonance with the later Wittgenstein's well-known anti-psychologism about meaning, although, at the same time, his remarks on aspect- and meaning-blindness may be harder to reconcile with Peirce's view since, according to Wittgenstein, meaning could be grasped without necessarily having any sort of feeling. The latter is a reviewer's worry. Among the many elements that would need proper elaboration here, we will only observe that one could argue that in Wittgenstein's view the null case (i.e., grasping meaning but blindly) should not be interpreted as non-felt and therefore as an essentially different case, but rather as a case in which, so to speak, the "feeling" parameter amounts to zero — because Wittgenstein is adamant that aspect-seeing is a layer that applies in addition but in continuity to the basic understanding of a language-game (PI § 247, Wittgenstein 2009); in fact, since he holds that aspect-seeing can be developed, trained, altered, and so on, he also implies that its absence does not represent a radically alternative scenario. Importantly, § 257 of the *Philosophical Investigations* is highly dubitative about the possibility of someone being aspect-blind and calls it a "conceptual investigation", rather than an empirical one. This interpretation makes even more sense if we keep in mind the analogy chosen to describe this aspect of our life: one could lack a "musical ear" (PI § 260), but it is clear that this is something that comes in degrees, is highly context-dependent, etc. To conclude, on this interpretation of Wittgenstein's remarks, we do not see a fundamental tension with Peirce's view.

Linguistic feeling, in this sense, participates in this *first effect* of sign-interpretation. It marks the point where an individual is not simply recognizing a rule by being affected by it, but allowing an openness to a response or reaction and further elaboration. It is the affective ground for recognizing what counts as appropriate, meaningful, or relevant within the social space of reasons. In other words, linguistic feeling is the immediately felt quality that accompanies our responsiveness to general norms.

This necessary grounding of conscious activity in affectivity calls into question several assumptions often embedded in discussions of linguistic feeling, chief among them, a differentiation between epistemic and linguistic feelings (see also Arango-Muñoz, Michaelian 2014). For instance, Romand (2023) suggests that while epistemic feelings can be seen “as the main constituent elements of linguistic feeling” (59), linguistic feeling itself adds a valenced dimension tied to pleasure and displeasure. However, this distinction rests on a problematic characterization of epistemic feelings as “the expression of a subjective, non-sensory, form of cognizance” (55). From this reading, affective phenomena may be construed as a kind of “subjective coloration” (52) layered upon otherwise neutral contents of consciousness. As we have argued, such a framework severs the continuity between normativity and affectivity, relegating the latter to a merely epiphenomenal status in relation to conceptual or rational activity. Within this model, linguistic feeling is treated as a metacognitive function, one that monitors one’s own cognitive processes rather than as an expression of the transformative mode between emotion and cognition. This additive view ultimately reinforces a representationalist framework, where affect only comments on or tracks cognition from a detached, secondary perspective.

To finish articulating an alternative, we return to the notion of the space of reasons. For a continuist, transformative approach, our responsiveness to reasons offers the key to connecting feeling and norms in linguistic activity, linking what is often called individual intuition with our shared knowledge of linguistic normativity. The felt dimension of normativity is not merely an affective accompaniment to reasoning, but a necessary condition for entering the space of reasons. It is through the immediacy of felt responsiveness (what Peirce might describe in terms of Firstness) that norms are experientially grasped as binding or relevant in the first place.

From this perspective, linguistic feeling is neither an internal nor external phenomenon, but an expression of our participation in the space of reasons. It is an affective manifestation of the very same conceptual capacities that render us responsive to reasons. It is not a mere reaction to linguistic forms, but a mode of attunement to our normative experience. Without this qualitative dimension, the intelligibility of normative force would remain abstract or external, lacking the affective traction that allows individuals to *find themselves* in a situation that calls for a response. In this sense, the space of reasons is not a space divorced from feeling, but one whose very accessibility depends on affective attunement.

Rather than conceiving linguistic norms as externally constituted and then psychologically internalized, we affirm the individual’s active role as a participant in the negotiation and reproduction of the normative social space. In this sense, norms must begin with feeling in order to be ‘self-determining’ (Seddone, 2022), that is, they must be affectively grasped as binding, not merely acquired as pre-given rules. It is through this affective attunement that we sustain and reproduce the principles that shape our shared form of life, by elaborating beliefs and judgments within it. For a norm to be effective, one must *believe* that the world ought to be a certain way and no other, that is, one must form a judgment that is experienced as self-consciously valid (Rödl 2018). In responding to reasons within a shared form of life, we thereby affirm or contest the very principles by which that form is constituted.

Within such a framework, the felt dimension of norms is what makes it possible to perceive a linguistic expression as correct or incorrect, meaningful or anomalous, and to *feel* this status before or alongside explicit reflection. In other words, linguistic feeling is the *felt aspect* of our participation in a practice where meaning, correctness, and justification are live issues. When I spontaneously *feel* that a sentence sounds right or wrong, this is not merely an unconscious statistical calculation based on frequency, nor a purely emotional hunch detached from reasons. It is an embodied, affective *uptake* of norms that I am already committed to as a rational agent: norms that are not reducible to public criteria but are sedimented in the very possibilities of seeing something as correct.

In sum, linguistic norms are affectively constituted in order to function experientially. That is, it is the felt quality of normativity that makes it possible to locate the act of languaging within the space of reasons in the first place.

5. Conclusion

The main aim of this essay was to provide a new reading of the classic, albeit somewhat slippery, notion of *linguistic feeling*.

In order to do so, we have first specified four interconnected theoretical premises. The first entails a dynamical view of language, better described as *languaging*. The second embraces a broadly enactive understanding of cognition according to which the latter is never not affective. The third consists in the adoption of a widened definition of normativity, that is, one that does not reduce it to overt, public norms, but detects its pervasiveness since perception. The fourth brings to the fore emotional variability in language across cultures. These four fundamental tenets allow us to treat languaging, emotion, and culture as operating within the same normative space.

Then, we provided a comprehensive redefinition of normativity. Against conventionalist theories that treat linguistic norms as external conventions, we emphasized their status as enabling conditions of intelligible practice, inseparable from sensibility and embodied experience. Perception itself is shown to be normatively laden, as conceptual capacities shape what counts as correct or incorrect, favorable or not, salient or irrelevant in seeing or judging. Thus, norms are neither

external rules nor statistical regularities, but conditions of rational experience. We do not act normatively against an abstract list of rules and public criteria, but by being responsive and sensible to our own activity. That is, self-consciousness and accountability play an essential role and are enacted in linguistic and affective practices that configure human forms of life. Emotions, in this context, are presented not as pre-rational impulses or reactive states, but as evaluative perceptions that both disclose and sustain normative structures.

Finally, we support this view through a revisitation of *linguistic feeling*, showing how body, emotion, and norm manifest together in the activity of languaging. Emotions should be regarded not as mere adaptive responses to socially constructed norms, but as integral to our ability to be norm-governed agents. The first step to provide a post-cognitivist view of linguistic feeling was to reject its commonplace internalist interpretation. Subsequently, we highlighted how we *feel* the norm, how immediate is this feeling that comes as we respond to it, namely, we show a sensibility to a perceived rightness or wrongness of an utterance, rooted in the affective dimension necessary to enter the space of reasons.

What we pursued was a novel account of linguistic feeling, as adjourned as possible to the contemporary interdisciplinary study of cognition, language, and affectivity. Given the substantial heterogeneity and cloudiness of definitions, providing a characterization that relates to a wide and growing field such as post-cognitivism should spark further debate directed at a clarification of the notion. Simultaneously, post-cognitivism itself has only recently begun developing a more comprehensive original theory of language: our account of linguistic feeling aims at participating in this collective endeavor.

To conclude, it is worth spending a few words on how this work relates to the “situated dimensions” mentioned in the title of the special issue. Although this is not the place for an in-depth characterization, it is important to remark that our view as a whole and each position employed throughout the elaboration we presented here strives to describe and conceive both language and emotion in their proper situated facets. Put differently, that amounts to avoid reducing them to context-independent regularities. In the words of [van den Herik and Rietveld \(2021\)](#), “situated normativity is expressed by being drawn to certain possibilities for action afforded by a *particular concrete* situation. There is thus no mindless repetition of context-independent behavior scripts, but instead a context-sensitive tendency toward grip on a particular situation”.¹³

While abstraction is an often-useful necessary passage in analysis, we insisted on tracing back not only the languaging pole and the affective one to a situated description, but, crucially, their built-in connection too. Overcoming more traditional understandings of norms found in linguistics and philosophy required showing the conceptually mediated nature of experience and, *a fortiori*, perception. Following McDowell, our rationality does make a basic difference to the nature of our perceiving: it gives us a ‘special form’ of perceptual sensitivity to our environment, one whose operations are themselves informed by our capacity to weigh reasons. We integrated these insights with a “qualitatively richer conception of human linguistic experience conceived as continuous, rather than as opposed to sensibility” ([Dreon 2022](#), 66), envisaging “normativity as grounded in affectively oriented sensibility” (16). A consequence of our elaboration of normativity as constitutive of experience through perception is the rejection of views that conceptualize culture or sociality at large as added layers to alleged mere bodies that are supposed to have a primigenial experience kind of raw experience.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Filippo Batisti: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Marcos G. Vidal:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Augusto Soares da Silva:** Writing – original draft.

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Data availability

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

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¹³ Despite a degree of overlapping, a difference between our proposal and [van den Herik and Rietveld's \(2021\)](#) one is that they focus on how “language enables people to articulate situated appreciations”, whereas by discussing linguistic feeling we addressed how normativity is inscribed in languaging.

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