



Enlanguaged experience. Pragmatist contributions to the continuity between experience and language

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Abstract

In this paper, I present the idea of “enlanguaged experience” as a radicalization of the Pragmatists’ approach to the continuity between language and experience in the human world as a concept that can provide a significant contribution to the current debate within Enactivism. The first part of the paper explores some new conceptual tools recently developed by enactivist scholarship, namely linguistic bodies, enlanguaged affordances, and languaging. In the second part, the notion of enlanguaged experience is introduced as involving two main interrelated ideas. The first is the idea that human experience is contingently, yet irreversibly, embedded from each person’s birth within contexts made up of linguistic practices that contribute to continuously redefining what happens. Consequently, the development of individuals’ motor, perceptual, affective, selective, and cognitive capacities does not take place in a silent vacuum, but in a context of linguistic practices that are already there: such practices already operate in, and are shared by, the human groups in which individuals begin their experiences. The second key idea is that enlanguaged experience implies the claim that humans primarily meet language as part of their experience of the world, rather than as an independent system of words and grammar. In the third part of the paper, I argue that the conception of human experience as enlanguaged can fruitfully contribute to the enactivist debate, particularly with reference to three main points: firstly, the idea of a circular continuity, which is to say the claim that the advent of language in human life caused a re-configuration of previously existing forms of sensibility both ontogenetically and phylogenetically; secondly, an ecological view of language, according to which humans find themselves embedded in already operating linguistic practices and habits that are a constitutive part of their naturally social world; and, thirdly, a richer view of language “in the wild”, capable of retrieving the qualitative, affective, or aesthetic components of human enlanguaged experience.

Keywords Pragmatism and Enactivism · Enlanguaged experience · Linguistic bodies · Enlanguaged affordances · Languaging

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1 Introduction: far beyond alleged oppositions¹

Pragmatism and Enactivism share the basic assumption that cognition is a function of life. Apparently, they also share two versions of a similar, albeit not identical, divide. On the one hand, according to the standard account, Neo-Pragmatism is characterized by the rejection of the Classical Pragmatists' basic claim (most notably advanced by James and Dewey) that experience can serve as the basis for an anti-intellectualist reconstruction of philosophy (Hildebrand, 2014). Richard Rorty argued that an alternative and no longer metaphysical strategy should free the Pragmatist program from any appeal to a merely experienced world, in favor of a focus on linguistic practices, namely on the world insofar as it is part of the human conversation (Rorty, 1982). On the other hand, Radical Enactivism (Hutto & Myin, 2013) seems to emphasize the divide between so-called lower-level cognition – basically, sensorimotor perception – and higher-level cognition, including memory, the imagination, and language, namely those domains of sense-making that are considered to be representation-hungry (Clark & Toribio, 1994). From this point of view, language poses a problem for Enactivism, insofar as it seems difficult to abandon the idea of linguistic cognition as the manipulation of content-bearing internal states when having to do with non-currently present or abstract objects, as is continuously the case in verbal speech (Kiverstein & Rietveld, 2018).

However, in either case, the situation is more fine-grained and complex than it seems, and can hardly be reduced to binary oppositions. David Hildebrand (Hildebrand, 2014) has noted that many leading names within Neo-Pragmatism continued to support an experienced-centered approach, including Richard Bernstein, Thomas Alexander, Mark Johnson, and Richard Shusterman. Calcaterra (Calcaterra, 2019) and Voparil (Voparil, 2022) provide a more nuanced interpretation of Rorty's indictment of experience. They argue that Rorty did not object to making philosophical assumptions about any experience of the world, but only to an idea of experience as something which basically takes place independently of linguistic practices and conversations. In other words, Rorty believed that Pragmatism had to free itself from all dogmatic empiricist residues, rather than throw out the baby with the bathwater. In *Human Landscapes* (Dreon, 2022), I have argued that the picture of the Classical Pragmatists as thinkers exclusively focusing on experience at the expense of language is simplistic and false, considering that they provided a series of significant, if scattered, accounts of various linguistic features, converging on the idea of language as a decisive factor in the understanding of human experience and the peculiarly human form of life. Dewey sketched an important account of the natural genesis of the human mind out of previous forms of animal behavior and the appearance of language in chapter 5 of his book, *Experience and Nature* (Dewey, 1981). One of his

¹ In writing this paper I have benefited from the questions and remarks that were addressed to me at the *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris in May 2023, where I was generously invited by Mathias Girel, at a seminar organized by Pierre Steiner at the *Université de Compiègne*, again in May 2023, and finally at the workshop on Pragmatism and Enactivism held by Guido Baggio in Rome in June 2023. I am grateful to the scholars, PhD students, and participants at these events for helping me to refine my position.

PhD students, Frank Lorimer, a largely neglected figure today, later provided a more coherent account of this view by emphasizing the transformative role of language with respect to pre-existing forms of organic intelligence (Lorimer, 1929). Dewey also interpreted communication as the making something common (Dewey, 1989) rather than the conveying of meanings considered to be previously and independently defined in thought or elsewhere. George Herbert Mead suggested that conversations of verbal gestures arose out of communicative contexts where turn-taking is primarily ruled through an affectively grounded sensibility toward the other person's actions and the effects of one's own words on both oneself and others. Even William James, the Classical Pragmatist who most strongly affirmed the primacy of experience, suggested a picture of language as a continuous flow, which is to say an alternative image of language compared to the standard idea of it as an association of names and primarily distinct units (Gavin, 1992; Jackman, 2017, Dreon, 2020).² In a nutshell, the Classical Pragmatists approached language from the point of view of experience, and of its peculiar function within human bio-cultural life in a natural and naturally social environment.³ They adopted a broadly anthropological point of view, including insights into both ontogenetic and phylogenetic processes. Building on this work, I suggest introducing the notion of “enlanguaged experience” as an attempt to make their scattered outcomes more explicit and coherent, so as to move definitely beyond the alleged dichotomy between language and experience – i.e., the idea they are two independent realms or fields within the human world. Ultimately, this would allow us to support the claim that the continuity between experience and language is not simply linear and progressive, but circular and based on a process of mutual transformation (Dreon, 2022).⁴

Although the main focus has traditionally been on reframing perception as embodied sense-making, a lively debate on language has also taken place within the composite enactivist community in recent years. Scholars seem to be engaged not only in overcoming the alleged divide between non-representational and still representation-demanding domains of cognition (Kiverstein & Rietveld, 2018 and 2021), but also in trying to provide a coherent account of language as a function of life, particularly human life (Di Paolo et al., 2018, Steffensen & Cowley 2021, Bottineau, 2017; Raimondi, 2019). The enactivist debate has led

² This statement does not deny that there is an ambiguity in James' treatment of language because of his criticism of language as favoring an atomistic conception of thought as primarily composed of discrete units, insofar as language itself is mainly conceived of as consisting in an association of names. Sometimes this critical approach coexists in the same text with a more dynamic view of language and meanings, as is the case in the famous chapter on the stream of thought in the *Principles* (James 1981, Ch. IX). Moreover, James seems to adopt a dichotomous understanding of the relation between concepts and experience (see the treatment of the deaf-mute case in James 1983) and consistently supports the claim of the priority of experience over thought (cf. James 1976). I have dealt with this issue extensively in Author.

³ See Bernstein 2020 for a picture of Dewey's “pragmatic naturalism”.

⁴ For limitations in terms of space and expertise, here I will not discuss Charles Peirce's insights on the subject and how they might contribute to the current debate in Enactivism. For an in-depth treatment of semiotics and the application of cognitive science to the study of signs, mind, and language see Paolucci 2021, whose research approach combines both Peirce's and Eco's legacy.

to the development of various conceptual tools, each grounded in specific interests connected to the various forms of Enactivism. Within the field of autopoietic Enactivism, Di Paolo, Cuffari, and De Jaegher conceive of “linguaging” as a kind of participatory sense-making (Cuffari, Di Paolo, De Jaegher 2015) and suggest the notion of human bodies as “linguistic bodies”, thereby reasserting the material, embodied nature of linguistic utterances, while also claiming that human bodies develop within “contexts of *full linguistic engagement*” (Di Paolo et al., 2018). Kiverstein and Rietveld have worked on extending Gibson’s notion of affordance, by supporting the idea that the human niche is a “rich landscape of affordances”, significantly including sociocultural affordances (Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014). In their view, the very idea of “enlanguaged affordances” provides a means to overcome the issue of (apparently) representation-hungry cognition and newly conceive of human language in ecological-enactive terms (Kiverstein & Rietveld, 2018, 2021). Cowley, Steffensen and the so-called Distributed Language Group adopt a broader perspective on language (Cowley, 2019, Steffensen & Cowley 2021), grounded in Maturana’s view of “linguaging”, as well as in Nigel Love’s distinction between “linguaging” as an umbrella term for the wide range of human linguistic behaviors and “language” as the product of these processes, later made autonomous and hypostatized through reflexivity and writing (Love, 2017). Further drawing on Maturana’s concept of languaging, Bottineau, Gregoire, and Raimondi support the view of languaging as strongly embodied, collaborative, and recursive communication (Bottineau, 2008, Bottineau & Gregoire 2017, Raimondi, 2019).

In what follows, I will introduce the pragmatist notion of “enlanguaged experience” (Section 3) as a significant contribution to the current debate within Enactivism based on the Pragmatists’ legacy. I will first provide a succinct overview of this debate in Section 2. The experiential approach, namely the intertwining of experience and language in the human world, seems to be a hallmark of an account grounded in pragmatist resources. In the following section (Section 4), I will focus on three main claims characterizing the pragmatist approach and representing major inputs for the current discussion: firstly, the idea that the advent of language in human life, both ontogenetically and phylogenetically, caused a feedback-action and re-configuration of preexisting forms of sensibility; secondly, the ecological view of language, according to which humans find themselves embedded in already operating linguistic practices and habits that are a constitutive part of their naturally social world; thirdly, a richer view of language “in the wild”, which goes beyond the idea of language as a primarily epistemic tool and autonomous system of words regulated through grammatical norms, by retrieving the qualitative, affective, or aesthetic components of human enlanguaged experience.

Although there are significant distinctions to be drawn between Pragmatism and Enactivism, as well as between different trends within these two fields, a common effort should be made to support a naturalistic, yet non-reductive, approach to the continuity between language and life.

2 Linguistic bodies, enlanguaged affordances, and languaging: the enactivist debate

In recent years, a series of interesting conceptual tools have been developed within the composite enactivist field to support a continuistic attitude. Three notions have arisen within different trends sharing an enactivist attitude in response to different problems and with different, if complementary, goals. In the tradition of so-called autopoietic Enactivism, Di Paolo, Cuffari, and De Jaegher basically arrived at the notion of “linguistic bodies”, which are grounded in sense-making insofar as they are characterized by being both intimately embodied and participatory (Di Paolo et al., 2018). Kiverstein and Rietveld developed the concept of “enlanguaged affordance” as a response to the challenging problem of so-called representation-hungry cognitive processes by emphasizing the complementarity between ecological psychology and radical anti-representational Enactivism (Rietveld and Kiverstein, 2014, Kiverstein and Rietveld, 2018, 2021). Building upon Maturana’s legacy, Cowley, Steffensen, and their colleagues, as well as French scholars such as Bottineau, Gregoire, and Raimondi, have been proposing an idea of languaging as a peculiar form of embodied, collaborative, and recursive communication, which is to say as a key notion to support the continuity between language and life. Their position involves a strong criticism of traditional views of language as an autonomous system, based on a hierarchical view of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics – mainly Structuralism and Generative Grammars, but also analytical philosophy of language. In what follows, I will focus on these positions a little more in detail.

Di Paolo, Cuffari, and De Jaegher have approached language as a kind of participatory sense-making developed by humans insofar as they are intelligent and linguistic bodies. Human bodies appear to be “linguistic bodies” because they ultimately amount to “processes, practices, and networks of relations” (Di Paolo et al., 2018: 7). In a first article, published in 2014 (Cuffari, Di Paolo and De Jaegher 2015), as well as in their later book (Di Paolo et al., 2018), these researchers’ point of departure is sense-making, i.e. cognition envisaged as a kind of vital process that must be framed within the dynamics of organic life: if cognition is a way for an organism to adaptively self-regulate in precarious conditions, language can be viewed as a peculiarly human form of radically embodied sense-making that is highly participatory. In particular, it involves the capacity to make recursive utterances that are directed both at one own self and at others (Di Paolo et al., 2018: 191). Furthermore, in departing from the concept of cognition as the processing of mental representations and the reading of what happens in another person’s mind, these researchers avoid the problem of so-called higher-order sense-making, apparently involving mental representations.

In their article Di Paolo, Cuffari, and De Jaegher proceed from participatory sense-making to languaging, while in their book they proceed from living bodies to intersubjective bodies, and then to linguistic bodies. Apparently, they provide an understanding of language development as an extension of bodily and participatory sense-making as something that is already operating independently

of shared linguistic practices and experiences (Cuffari, Di Paolo and De Jaegher 2015: 1098). However, in their book they clarify that this kind of filiation from participatory sense-making to languaging is only a theoretical model, which should be understood dialectically. In the second part of the book, this point is established more clearly, as the authors explicitly argue that incorporation and sensorimotor activity among humans occur within a linguistic community that transforms organic bodies into bodies that are capable of being self-reflective, developing forms of meta-discourse, distancing themselves from the present features of a perceived environment, and consequently developing an objectifying attitude (Di Paolo et al., 2018: 191 and ff.). They also explicitly acknowledge that infants' bodies are "engaged by the whole complexity of linguistic agency from the beginning" and consequently that "full linguistic engagement" affects human incorporation (Di Paolo et al., 2018: 231). In a nutshell, although they take autonomous sense-making bodies as their point of departure, it seems as though these researchers are trying to move beyond the mainstream phenomenological approach that goes from experience to judgment (Husserl, 1973) – and which still appears to be at work in those positions that assume a kind of in-principle opposition between perceptual experiences, sensorimotor activities, and more generally so-called low-order processes in comparison to language, the imagination, memory, and allegedly high-order processes.

Kiverstein and Rietveld's notion of "enlanguaged affordances" strongly focuses on this issue and essentially serves to provide a solution to the problem (Kiverstein & Rietveld, 2021). Their primary goal is to demonstrate that human responses to the environment are not mediated by internal representations. Even when human interactions involve dealing with something that is not present or abstract (Kiverstein & Rietveld, 2018), an alternative, non-representational interpretation of more complex cognitive processes is possible without evoking a kind of "decoupling" from the environment and resorting to mental states. It is "out there" in the world itself that cognition takes place as a temporally extended process because humans can find a "rich landscape of affordances" in their environment (Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014), including not only perceptual opportunities for organic action, but also socio-cultural and enlanguaged invitations to act, perceive, and think. Extending Gibson's original insights, they claim that affordances are to be seen at the cross-road between a form of life and its own ecological niche, which is to say between available abilities within a specific form of life and opportunities that are selected from the environment. Given that the human niche is broadly configured through linguistic practices, such as talking and writing, these scholars suggest abandoning Gibson's idea of a distinction between "first-hand" perceptions and "second-hand" cultural and enlanguaged perception within the human niche (Kiverstein & Rietveld, 2021, 178). An individual's bodily skills appear to be responsive and sensitive to the skillful activities of other people and both of them seem to be "woven into practices of speaking with others" (Kiverstein and Rietveld, 2021, 184).

By means of their key reference to Ecological Psychology, Kiverstein and Rietveld's strategy ultimately appears to be grounded on a basic ecological shift from sense-making to features and possibilities in the environment, in comparison to Di Paolo, Cuffari, and De Jaegher's account of linguistic bodies – although both

sense-making and affordances are conceived of as relational or interactional concepts, insofar as they involve the idea of structural couplings between organisms and their environment, forms of life and their ecological niches. It seems that, according to this proposal, it is still possible to maintain a distinction between enlanguaged affordances and non-enlanguaged (i.e. merely embodied) affordances within the human niche, although Kiverstein and Rietveld acknowledge that even embodied affordances develop in contexts of shared linguistic practices. However, we might wonder whether we need an ad hoc concept designed to explain highly complex forms of cognition in non-representative ways, namely “enlanguaged affordance”, in order to build and maintain the nexus between embodied experience and a cultural-linguistic world.⁵ The problem is that we risk adopting a model of experience and language which is still dualistic, even though it is mediated by certain ecological or relational properties.

A more radical approach is represented by a diverse group of scholars, mainly linguists, who support a radically embodied ecolinguistic perspective, and share with many of the Enactivists’ basic ideas: from embodiment to an understanding of cognition as a mode of sense-making grounded in organic life in a shared environment, as well as an emphasis on the role of the environment in the constitution of life dynamics. They build on Maturana’s idea of languaging to support a view of human language as a form of bio-communication, which is to say a range of practices that allow each living being to maintain bonds with other beings and with itself, (Love, 2017, 115) and which are grounded in the biological constraints characterizing human mammals. In other words, bio-communication is a form of peculiarly coordinated intraspecific activity (Love, 2017, 117), and languaging, insofar as it is the specifically human mode of bio-communication, includes self-reflectivity (Love, 2017) as well as recursive coordination (Raimondi, 2019, 23). The languaging approach involves a strong criticism of traditional linguistics (Saussure’s Structuralism and Generative Grammars) insofar as it assumes language to be an autonomous system, basically independent and logically prior to its practices and uses in a form of life (Cowley & Steffensen 2021; Love, 2017). They criticize the view of language as a primarily abstract faculty, understood as basically symbolic, which is to say – according to their view – as functional to conveying thoughts or meanings, envisaged as being independently elaborated within the individual speaker’s mind (Bottineau, 2017, 9). According to Love, “languaging” is an umbrella term covering a series of human activities, such as speaking, listening, writing, and reading. In other words, it consists in the broad variety of uses that humans make of language, provided the term ‘language’ is not taken to refer to something that already exists even before its use (Love, 2017, 115). In his overview of definitions of languaging, Raimondi lists some of the main positive views of the concept in addition to the rejection of formalist and hypostatizing approaches to language: the commitment to a behavioral, ecological, and multimodal conception of languaging; the approach to languaging as a biological function that is strongly embodied, realized through the

⁵ For an in-depth analysis of the meanings of affordance and its functions, see Manuel Heras-Escribano 2019.

use of the tongue, the hands, etc., and connected to motor-perceptive action; the idea of languaging as involving forms of (en)action in specific situations; and the focus on coordinated and recursive interactions as the background in which individual creative behavior is embedded (Raimondi 2019, 20). Assuming a mutual process of co-constitution between humans and their ecological niche in non-geological times, languaging is viewed as a specific modality of embodied and coordinated interaction through which the human environment is configured (Bottineau & Gregoire 2017, 11–12). By assuming this role of languaging in the co-constitution of humans and their environment, Cowley states that embodied dynamics are configured through verbal constraints, meaning that perception, action, and movement emerge both phylogenetically and ontogenetically through their adaptation to “wordings”; in other words, already existing practices function as material constraints for embodied experience (Cowley, 2019, 484–485). When viewed against this background, languages appear to be the output of languaging, namely “a systematized corpus or codification of linguistic *abstracta*, derived from languaging by decontextualizing recurrent patterns of phono-semantic similarity and treating those similarities as samenesses” (Love, 2017, 117).

To sum up, the main objective pursued by supporters of Radical Embodied Eco-linguistics is to reframe the very concept of language, and consequently to call into question traditional linguistics and its allegedly autonomous disciplinary status. They even explicitly declare that “there is no hard and fast boundary between the linguistic and the non-linguistic” (Love, 2017, 115) as a consequence of their communicative approach to languaging. “Am I ‘languaging’ when I raise an eyebrow in response to something you say, or without speaking get up and close the door when you ask me to do so? I am certainly ‘using language’; my actions depend on my understanding of the utterances concerned” (Love, 2017, 115).⁶ Di Paolo, Cuffari, and De Jaegher would not seem ready to endorse this Maturanian legacy, because it is too vague in their eyes, given that “whatever humans do together that meets certain functional criteria of recursive coordination will count” as languaging (Cuffari, Di Paolo and De Jaegher 2015, 1095). For sure, one can and should try to make conceptual tools as sharp as possible; however, one wonders whether the very contours of human communication might not be fuzzy because they are more or less continuous with pre-existent forms of organic communication.

Drawing on the Classical Pragmatists’ work, in the next section I will suggest shifting our focus from the reframing of the language concept to the intertwining of language and experience in the human world.

⁶ Although for the purposes of this paper, I am dealing with the various scholarly approaches to “languaging” as essentially convergent, they actually form a complex constellation of thought, insofar as they support at least two main views. One group of scholars restricts “languaging” to bio-logic (Raimondi 2019), linguistic techniques (Bottineau 2017) and practices (Cowley 2011) providing a new reconceptualization of language. Other scholars reject “language” by stressing that practices (not just communication) presuppose the logic of languaging, thereby adopting a quasi-transcendental approach. For example, radical ecolinguists, inspired by Becker’s (1988) anthropology, challenge linguistics by drawing on Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and a reading of Maturana’s work. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewer for pointing out this important caveat.

3 "Enlanguaged experience": a pragmatist approach

As hinted above, in the Classical Pragmatists' works many outstanding contributions can be found that discuss language within a broadly anthropological framework, by examining how it shapes the human world. In accordance with Darwin's legacy (Pearce, 2020), the Classical Pragmatists approached experience and cognition from the point of view of life, rather than from a primarily epistemic standpoint. Building on this ground, they adopted a continuity framework for language, according to which verbal interactions between humans are anchored in a naturally shared environment (Dewey, 1981), as well as in previous forms of organic intelligence (Lorimer, 1929). According to this view, verbal interactions have developed out of preexisting forms of gestural conversation, of the kind taking place among non-human animals by means of affectively and emotionally based mutual regulation, rather than in purely instrumental ways (Mead, 2011). This focus on continuity did not prevent the Classical Pragmatists from considering the peculiarity of the human form of life in comparison to non-human mammals. In particular, Dewey and Mead stressed the impact of language on already existent forms of organic-environmental interaction and the role of linguistic behavior in the arising of the human mind, namely in promoting mental interactions, as well as in engendering forms of self-reflectivity. These philosophers essentially envisaged language as a mode of behavior and regarded shared contexts and participatory situations (be they peaceful or aggressive) as the natural human condition, rooted in the strong mutual dependence characterizing human communities because of their organic constitution. In contrast, they never envisaged language as an independent system of words and rules governing their combination, as well as the connections between the alleged interior theater of the mind and objects in the external world. At the same time, they refused to adopt the idea of language as merely the outer expression of thinking, understood as an essentially mental event. Moreover, these thinkers assumed language to be a very rich, multilayered, and multifunctional phenomenon that supports social ties on mainly qualitative-affective grounds, makes things and events common, ensures the mutual coordination of social behavior on different scales, and operates both analytically and holistically. They highlighted not only that language is the main means to scaffold reflection and inference, but also that it enters human experience as immediate enjoyment or suffering in relation to circumstances that are either favorable or adverse to human life.

Although the Classical Pragmatists did not speak of "enlanguaged experience", I believe that this expression can be helpful to sum up their views, while making them more coherent and radical (Dreon, 2022). Although the idea of a close intertwining of experience and language in the human world had long been clear to me (Dreon, 2007), I first came across the adjective *enlanguaged* in relation to the human world, culture, knowledge, and the arts through Joseph Margolis's work (Margolis, 2009, Margolis, 2016). Here it is used in connection with the word "enculturated" in order to express the idea that in the human form of life biological features have been transformed through the fortuitous yet irreversible advent of culture and language, or – to state it in Margolis' own words – through cultural and linguistic utterances.

Before explaining the concept of “enlanguaged experience”, some clarifications on the pragmatist conception of experience must be added, because it is from this peculiar angle that I suggest approaching continuity in a pragmatist vein, namely from the *medias res* of organic-environmental interactions, rather than from a mythical beginning that cannot be subjected to doubt. The pragmatist conception of experience is very far indeed from the modern idea of experience as something occurring within the mind of the subject and eventually mediating (or impeding) the knowledge of the reality out there. Dewey provides some basic overviews of experience, considering it to be a function of life, rather than cognition, and emphasizing that it happens in the environment, through it, or by means of it. Experience consists of the interactions continuously taking place between organisms and their environment, through which organic life is constituted as part of the environment and the environment itself is at least partially changed from the inside (Dewey, 1989, Ch. 1). Experience consists of whatever humans do or undergo anything, as well as of resources and energies coming from the environment. In a famous passage drawing upon James’ *Essays on Radical Empiricism*, Dewey says that experience includes not only the activities of the farmer but also the field he cultivates, as well as the weather conditions he tries to deal with (Dewey, 1981, 18).

Given this naturalistic yet non-reductive conception of experience, what does it mean to say that human experience is enlanguaged? What are the consequences of assuming a conception of experience as something that is dynamically constituted not only by organic and individual resources, but also by environmental features? In other words, what are the consequences of assuming not a simply externalist account of experience, but an ecological-organic view of it?⁷

What all this means is that human experience is contingently, yet irreversibly, embedded from each person’s birth in contexts made up of linguistic practices, as well as more or less meaningful relations, that contribute to continuously redefining what happens. The point, I would argue, is to consider the impact of the surrounding world on individuals, and hence to realize that the development and refinement of their motor, perceptual, affective, selective, and cognitive capacities do not take place in a silent vacuum. Instead, they take place in a context of linguistic practices that are already there, already operating, and shared by the human groups within which individuals begin to experience the surrounding world. Individuals then gradually begin to refine these linguistic practices through a kind of entrainment effect, by tuning in to and adopting the linguistic habits that they find already in use. This point is evident if we consider infant development, i.e. if we adopt the perspective of

⁷ In writing this paper, I wondered whether it might be appropriate to characterize the Pragmatists’ view of experience as ‘externalist’. It is, of course, if by ‘externalist’ one means ‘non-internalist’. However, it is not an externalist view in standard behaviorist terms, namely a view exclusively focused on directly observable actions and behavior. For Dewey and Mead, even brain processes and memories, i.e. so-called internal events, are part of experience insofar as they flow into organic-environmental interactions. The point is that they should not be thought of as the main, and possibly causal, features of experience, because – as Dewey already noted in his criticism of brain-centrism – it is not a brain that thinks, perceives, and acts, but an organism interacting with specific situations and contexts (cf. Boyles & Garrison 2017).

a situated and ecologically oriented psychology of human development, so to speak. It appears clear even when considering that the development of the brain and the whole nervous system largely take place after birth, i.e. in a context where organic and neurological growth is exposed to more or less refined linguistic communication practices from the very beginning – as James, Dewey, and Mead explicitly noted (James, 1981, Ch. IV and Mead, 2011, Ch. 9). In other words, it should be acknowledged that neurological development itself is embedded in a cultural-linguistic environment from the beginning (see Mithen & Parsons, 2008).⁸

At the same time, “enlanguaged experience” also refers to the fact that human beings do not primarily encounter language in an isolated or pure form, whatever this might be: the mere logical structure of language, a transparent device for making univocal references, a series of distinct and clear definitions, the product of an innate grammar, and so on. Conversely, we primarily meet language as part of our conduct, as well as of our environment: it is deeply mixed with other communicative components of our behavior, which could roughly be characterized as multimodal and are continuous with more strictly linguistic aspects. In a nutshell, language is part of the thick fabric of our experience, as well as of the human world.

4 Pragmatist contributions to the debate

From what has been stated until now, this pragmatist approach is peculiar because it focuses on the pervasive intertwining of experience and language in the human world, starting from an externalist or ecological view of experience, considered to have been irreversibly – albeit fortuitously – reconfigured by the advent of language. The basic idea is that human experience unfolds from the very beginning within a world that is laden with and shaped by already operating linguistic habits and practices, already ongoing conversations on which individual utterances depend and to which they become attuned. In other words, the very idea of a space or primary phase of mere experience for human beings is a myth. Consequently, language can be conceived of as belonging to the thick fabric of experience, meaning that humans do not primarily meet words in isolation. Of course, one can and, in many cases, must draw distinctions between distinctively embodied experience and words or syntax. However, these distinctions should be interpreted as being secondary and functional to tackling specific problems, rather than being dogmatically regarded as independent and self-enclosed structures – for this would amount to a particular philosophical fallacy according to the Pragmatists, namely the fallacy which consists in assuming the results of a previous analytical reflection as the ultimate constituents of reality (Dewey, 1981, 34).

⁸ From what has been argued so far, it should be evident that the claim that human experience is enlanguaged is developed within a naturalistic framework, implying that experience contingently derives from the reorganization of previously existing organic and environmental resources. Coherently with the pragmatist legacy, this view remains distant from quasi-transcendentalist approaches to language as the enabling condition of human experience, such as those adopted by Apel, McDowell, and Brandom (see Author, Ch. 5).

The above-mentioned enactivist solutions differ from the idea of “enlanguaged experience” insofar as they are primarily centered on language as a specific kind of sense-making, as well as on “linguistic bodies”, which is to say on human embodiment insofar as it develops within linguistic communities. Their point of departure is essentially autonomously sense-making bodies, rather than some kind of coordinative activity at work from the very beginning; however, as already stated, they seem to approach a more dialectical view of human incorporation as something already occurring in and shaped through linguistic engagement. As regards enlanguaged affordances, these are basically meant to solve a specific problem that has arisen within the enactivist field, namely to guarantee a view of complex forms of cognition as ecologically scaffolded, rather than as structured through internal representations. Given this, however, it seems that the argument in support of the connection between embodiment and a cultural-linguistic world rests on specific ad hoc structures that lie at the intersection between human perceptions and the environment. The “languaging” approach is a proposal for radically reframing the very concept of language, starting from a strong criticism of the autonomist conceptions of language adopted by mainstream linguists and philosophers of language. Supporters of this view wish to recover a conception of language “in the wild”, so to say, namely a view that might be closer to the actual linguistic practices we encounter in daily experience. Some ecolinguists support an even more radical claim, by emphasizing the continuity and intertwining between “wordings” and other features of coordinate recursive activity. In so doing, they seem to approach the pragmatist-inspired notion of “enlanguaged experience”.

In spite of these methodological differences, I believe that a pragmatist-inspired view can significantly contribute to refining the current debate. More specifically, I wish to emphasize three main consequences deriving from a pragmatist approach: (1) a circular notion of the continuity between experience and language, namely the idea that the advent of language caused and continues to cause a feedback or loop effect on animal sensibility; (2) the idea that the human environment is a linguistic environment, i.e. that language is primarily encountered as an ecological feature of the naturally social human environment – humans are already embedded in the words of others, even before any individual utterance occurs; (3) a “denser” conception of language, which moves beyond the idea that language is fundamentally made up of true and false propositions, and involves qualitative-affective (Dewey, Lorimer, Mead) aspects and vague or mongrel features (James, Margolis), with a multitude of functions beyond supporting cognition: establishing and maintaining bonds, enjoying current interactions, doing things together, and supporting practices.

4.1 Circular continuity, or language as an agent of transformation of previous animal forms of sensibility

Provided that most approaches converge on the idea of the continuity between life and language, between experience and language, the theoretical point in need of clarification concerns the kind of continuity to be assumed. In this regard, I believe that Dewey’s notion of “cultural naturalism” provides the best conceptual

background for framing the issue (Dewey, 1991, 28). In a nutshell, cultural naturalism is a non-reductive form of naturalism that assumes culture to be continuous with nature, rooted in the very organic and environmental conditions of human life, and yet irreducible to the mere association of preexisting resources. In this view, humans' enhanced socio-cultural development has its roots in their organic constitution: it appears to be required by the very physiological-environmental conditions characterizing humans (such as human mammals' strong immaturity and dependence on their social group of caregivers at birth, enhanced brain and nervous-system plasticity, specific features of the vocal apparatus due to humans' bipedal posture, and the strong mobility of hands and faces, supporting gestural communication), without being reducible to mere physical structures and chemical processes.

However, this is not all. Considering the picture drawn so far, one could imagine that Pragmatism endorses a form of linear continuity, whereby organic conditions are dealt with as the ground for further social and cultural developments. But I would argue instead that the mature fruit of Deweyan Pragmatism is the notion of circular continuity: the view that the factors and sociocultural features of the human environment mutually condition, dynamically shape, and reciprocally reinforce one another. In other words, in acknowledging that cultural development is involved in specific organic-environmental features characterizing the human animal, one must assume that a complementary feedback action on organic functions is exercised by the cultural-linguistic niche, and that this mutual conditioning is part of the process by which humanity has been shaped, a process which still remains open to further reorganization. Cultural naturalism entails the idea that new forms of interaction between humans and the environment have feedback and loop effects on the environment itself, as well as on preexisting organic-environmental interactions (Author, Ch. 1). In a nutshell, cultural naturalism involves a circular process, not a linear or cumulative transition from a first mode of experience (merely perceptive/embodied) to a second one (cultural/linguistic).

I would argue, therefore, that a naturalistic approach to specifically human sensibility should take into account the effects of the broadly linguistic structure of humans' environment on the re-shaping of their sensibility, in comparison to other moving and sensitive, yet non-speaking, forms of animal life – i.e. forms of life that are not better or worse, but de facto different. In a nutshell, my claim is that the highly social and cultural-linguistic niche in which humans find themselves has a feedback action or loop effect with respect to organic sensibility and contributes to reshaping it, by transforming it from animal to distinctively human sensibility.

By reframing sensibility from the point of view of life rather than cognition, in *Human Landscapes* (Dreon, 2022, Ch. 2) I suggested that we define sensibility as involving two interrelated elements. On the one hand, it involves a form of exposure, vulnerability, or passivity on the part of each organism, whose very life, survival, and possibility to flourish depend on the environment entering its own constitution in a variety of ways – from nourishment, oxygen, and heat to protection and companionship. On the other hand, sensibility includes a form of orientation, selectivity, and discrimination that amounts to an active disposition rooted in a wide range of features and habits.

The emergence of linguistic interactions probably had – and still continues to have – an impact on the organic sensibility of the self-moving and highly socially dependent human animal. A more complex and fine-grained sensibility could be considered the result of the transformative impact of linguistic practices. Humans are able to feel a situation according to a significant variety of nuanced moods and emotions that goes beyond the binary opposition between favorable and adverse life conditions, because of the culturally rich environment they have inherited from their predecessors. Even self-awareness, as a kind of feeling directed toward oneself, could be seen as a development of organic sensibility due to embeddedness in an enlanguaged environment. By means of their complex symbolic and linguistic transactions with others, human beings became able to feel themselves and to focus on their own feelings and sense of themselves as distinct from their interlocutors. Humans' capacity to become self-reflective and acquire a sense of being a self cannot be regarded as a mere intellectual process, by primarily interpreting self-consciousness as a form of metacognition directed toward the knower him- or herself. Finally, even self-identity and being a person (Margolis, 2017) can be seen as deriving from the feedback action exercised by discursive practices with respect to organic sensibility, through narration, story-telling, pretending, fictionalizing, etc.

4.2 An ecological view of language

As already mentioned, enlanguaged experience also involves the claim that each individual primarily meets language as an integral part of the world she belongs to, which is to say in the linguistic practices she finds herself embedded in and to which she tries to attune herself. In other words, language is primarily encountered in shared conversations: not through one's first individual utterance, but through the talking of other humans that are already there. This point should be understood in literal rather than merely metaphorical terms, since conversations, linguistic habits, and practices precede individual utterances, which must become attuned (either consensually or polemically) with preexisting usages, modes of speaking, ways of referring to things, and so on.

With good reasons, scholars (Black, 1962, Cometti *unpublished manuscript* (n.d.), Faerna, 2018, Steiner, 2019) have emphasized that the Pragmatists' approach to meaning, like Wittgenstein's, is anti-mentalistic: the Pragmatists maintain that the meaning of a word does not lie in any representational content in the mind, but rather in the use which humans make of the word within linguistic interactions and practices related to their specific form of life. Meaning is not conceived of as something private – it “is not indeed a psychic existence”; rather, it is primarily envisaged as a quality of behavior, more precisely of “cooperative behavior” (Dewey, 1981, 141). Furthermore, Dewey continues, meaning “is the acquisition of significance by things in their status in making possible and fulfilling shared cooperation” (Dewey, 1981, 142; see also Mead, 1922). Consequently, one could clarify the Pragmatists' stance by claiming that they did not simply adopt an externalist view of meanings as emerging from linguistic practices, but more radically envisaged them to be an integral part of the environment in a variety of ways. Firstly, as already stated,

preexisting linguistic practices and habits are already there before any individual utterance takes place, and constitute important constraints which individual utterances must take into account; therefore, individual speech must be seen as the output of both organic and behavioral features, on the one hand, and of environmental conditions, on the other, which is to say as already existing communicative practices and linguistic habits. Secondly, linguistic practices give rise to the meanings of things: things become meaningful insofar as they are part of shared activities; hence, shared meanings become part of the world and the institutions humans inhabit. This claim could be seen as a point of convergence with the concept of enlanguaged affordances considered in Section 2, insofar as its proponents emphasize the ecological status of such affordances.

In a nutshell, the Pragmatists' legacy should be radicalized by explicitly embracing a view of language as part of human ecology. From this point of view, the human environment is not only naturally social, but also naturally enlanguaged, namely constantly reconfigured by the broadly linguistic interactions occurring within the environment itself – rather than as a means to mediate between subjects and external reality.

With regard to this point, important insights are provided by current studies in language evolution. Building on Laland, Odling-Smee, and Feldman's conception of niche construction (Laland et al., 2000), Chris Sinha has suggested an idea of language as a bio-cultural niche constituted at the epigenetic level by means of mutual interactions between organisms and their artefactual niche (Sinha, 2009, 2015). In Sinha's view, language and culture are an integral part of human ecology, because human organisms continuously transform their environmental niche through linguistic and cultural practices, as well as material actions. Linguistic interactions are embodied in institutions that become environmental constraints on human experience across different generations.

4.3 A richer view of language

A third basic insight that can be derived from the Pragmatists' legacy, I believe, lies in a richer view of language "in the wild". Although these thinkers attributed a crucial role to language – which is to say to the peculiarity of human cognition – in the emergence of mental behavior, they did not reduce language to a (powerful) epistemic tool. Instead, the Pragmatists variously emphasized the qualitative, affective, and aesthetic components of human enlanguaged experience.

This is an important point to bear in mind for two reasons. On the one hand, it allows us to avoid one-sided and over-simplistic pictures of language as exclusively the vehicle of reason (à la Schopenhauer), a tool for judgment (Husserl, 1973), mindful activity (Dreyfus, 2007), the providing of reasons (Sellars, 2007), or representational cognition (Hutto & Myin, 2013). On the other hand, it allows us to avoid the kind of standard oppositions that such images are laden with: if language is the means to acquire conceptual knowledge, it is foreign to feeling and directly grasping the truth; if it is the instrument for mindful activity, it stands in contrast to mindless coping with the world; if it is a big part of the formulation of judgments and reasons,

it must be opposed to immediate, silent experience; and if it is part of higher-level cognitive processes, it is cut off from purely sensorimotor sense-making.

The Pragmatists, I would argue, have provided some important insights to avoid these kinds of oppositions, which could roughly be said to amount to the dualism between language and experience. Instead, they have emphasized the continuity and commonalities between experience and language, as well as the very idea that human speech is an integral part of experience: not only of cognition but also of experience as what is immediately enjoyed or suffered, namely qualitatively felt. In what follows, I will try to sum up some of their key contributions in this direction.

Building on Dewey's *Experience and Nature*, Frank Lorimer strongly highlighted the embodied origins and nature of human speech.⁹ In dealing with the growth of reason out of organic forms of intelligence through the transformations that occurred with the advent of speech, Lorimer came to regard speech as a function of life and the peculiar development of preexisting organic functions (Lorimer, 1929). He saw the human voice as deriving from the transformation of breathing, crying, and sound emission within a socially shared environment that made them meaningful for interlocutors from the very beginning. He also paid attention to the development of the perceptive-motor habits grounding vocal-auditory coordination, as well as to cadence and rhythm in conversations as basic features for language acquisition in early infancy that are no less important than the capacity to refer to objects and other individuals in the world. Lorimer also emphasized that infants' first vocalizations give them pleasure and enjoyment, and can thus be considered the antecedents of artistic activities or "aesthetic incunabula" (cf. Dissanayake, 2001). We might say that, in referring to the work of Donovan and Jespersen, Lorimer saw the beginnings of language as being closer to the arts than representation. Moreover, he considered nomination, which is to say the emergence of distinct unities of speech, as deriving from a primarily affective-aesthetic fabric of speech, whose fluency is linked to the continuous nature of the organic processes grounding it (breathing and crying).

John Dewey provided an interesting account of verbal meanings as emerging from feelings, according to an ontogenetic perspective. Considering the feeling of the environment to be a basic feature characterizing animal life, he defined it as holistic and as generally regarding the favorable or adverse circumstances on which living beings depend. In Dewey's view, among self-moving animals, feelings become sense insofar as each feeling identifies a precise reference, leading to the development of a more or less refined capacity to postpone consummation and the fulfillment of action in favor of something that is not present in the current space, but can be reached through locomotion. Sense becomes meaning and signification among humans because they can also use preexisting signals, gestures, and words as signs to anticipate something else and share it via cooperative activity (Dewey, 1981, 200). Consequently, as hinted above, Dewey regards language as a decisive factor in the emergence of mental behavior among humans. However, language is not seen exclusively as instrumental, that is as scaffolding reflective experience.

⁹ For a more detailed account of Frank Lorimer's picture of language, its relation to reason, and their common roots in living processes, see Dreon [forthcoming](#).

Dewey frequently repeats that “[d]iscourse is both instrumental and consummatory” (Dewey, 1981, 144; see also 157), while Lorimer argues against “the artificiality of making any rigid distinction between the affective and the referential relationships of words” (Lorimer, 1929, 63). Meanings remain a “concerted or combined method of using and enjoying things” in possible interactions (Dewey, 1981, 148): conversations and words are not only modes of cooperative activity and usage, but are still enjoyed or suffered for their impact on one’s own life; in other words, discourse is part of so-called immediate or primary experience within the human form of life.

This is a groundbreaking point with reference to the issue at stake, because it clarifies that Dewey’s distinction between so-called primary experience (also characterized as “qualitative”, “esthetic”, or “immediate”) and reflective experience is not a distinction between merely perceptive, embodied, pre-discursive experience and conceptual, discursive, linguistic experience. It does not coincide with the distinction between experience and judgment characterizing the phenomenological tradition, or between embodied perception and action on the one hand, and so-called representation-hungry sense-making on the other. Instead, this is a distinction between two different kinds of experiences (be they eminently embodied or chiefly spoken): on the one hand, experiences that are absorbing, directly affect one’s own life, and/or work habitually, without any clear perception of distinct aspects; on the other hand, reflective inquiries, elicited by a crisis in habitual behavior and the need to find a way out. Human speech is an essential part of reflective experience, i.e. cognition in action or inquiry, insofar as it plays a crucial role in enabling a reflective return to previous interactions and the disentanglement of various aspects of a previous integral experience, so as to find a new habit of response. However, as Lorimer states, speech also has a primarily qualitative-aesthetic tissue, which is evident in poetry, rhetoric, and the arts. It can be seen in early infants’ interactions with their caregivers, as well as among adults in everyday life: humans do not simply make assertions through words, but feel the interlocutor’s proximity or distance, are friendly or offensive, order, prey, etc. Moreover, inquiries are not detached from qualitative experience: while they are grounded in primarily holistic forms of interactions, their results are continuously integrated into new holistic, qualitatively felt interactions and habitual behavior; they are incorporated into primary experience and contributing to reshaping it continuously. Consequently, the field of language is not only analytic reflection, but human experience in all its many different forms.¹⁰

¹⁰ George Herbert Mead made at least another important contribution to the study of the continuity between affective experience and linguistic interactions, by providing some interesting insights into the emergence of linguistic conversations out of emotion-based interactions. In Mead’s view, emotions serve as a means to mutually regulate social conduct while still maintaining a crucial role in verbal communication (see Dreon 2019). See Guido Baggio’s paper in the current issue of the journal for a comprehensive discussion of Mead’s theory of gestures as an attempt to overcome the dichotomic view of lower and higher level cognition (Baggio 2023).

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I have distanced myself from the idea that both Pragmatism and Enactivism emphasize the dichotomy between experience and language or between merely embodied sense-making and representative forms of cognition. Although this view of Pragmatism and Enactivism is not completely unjustified, I believe that it is simplistic and certainly of little help when it comes to realizing that the development of a cultural-naturalistic view of the continuity between experience and language is a goal pursued by both philosophical currents. A charitable attitude toward both traditions of thought allows us to see that, on the one hand, the Pragmatists' views on experience and language were complex from the very beginning: both were considered to be grounded in life – that is, in organic-environmental interactions – and continuous, meaning that speech was seen as having emerged from experience, yet also as having caused irreversible transformations in previous forms of animal sensibility. The Pragmatists also adopted an idea of language as a part of human behavior and as responding to a plurality of functions, not only eminently cognitive ones. By contrast, Enactivist scholarship has been striving to overcome the dualism between radically embodied sense-making and language, insofar as it considers the latter to involve allegedly higher-level cognitive processes. Cuffari, Di Paolo, and De Jaegher have developed the idea of linguistic bodies, emphasizing that human embodiment occurs within a linguistic world. Kiverstein and Rietveld have instead extended Gibson's notion of affordance by claiming that the human niche is characterized by enlanguaged affordances, in an effort to solve the problem of apparently representation-hungry forms of cognition. Finally, supporters of Radical Embodied Ecolinguistics have been working on a radical re-framing of the very notion of language by drawing on Maturana's concept of languaging and focusing on the structural intertwining of verbal and non-verbal features in human communication.

In this paper, I have presented the notion of enlanguaged experience I have derived from the Pragmatists as involving two basic elements. On the one hand, we have the idea that human experience is contingently, yet irreversibly, embedded from each person's birth within contexts made up of linguistic practices that contribute to continuously redefining what happens. Consequently, the development of their motor, perceptual, affective, selective, and cognitive capacities does not take place in a silent vacuum, but rather in a context of linguistic practices that are already there, already at work, and shared by the human groups in which individuals begin their experiences. On the other hand, the claim that human experience is enlanguaged implies that humans primarily meet language as a part of their experience of the world, rather than an independent system of words and grammar. The conception of human experience as enlanguaged – I have argued – can prove fruitful within the enactivist debate, particularly with reference to three main points: firstly, the idea of a circular continuity, namely the idea that the advent of language in human life caused a re-configuration of pre-existing forms of sensibility, both ontogenetically and phylogenetically; secondly, an ecological view of language, according to which humans find themselves

embedded in already operating linguistic practices and habits that are a constitutive part of their naturally social world; thirdly, a richer view of language “in the wild”, which retrieves the qualitative, affective, or aesthetic components of human enlanguaged experience and dissolves the image of language as the exclusive means to knowledge.

These points are characteristic of a Pragmatist-inspired view, although they are not exclusive to such a view, of course. I believe they may help highlight certain aspects in the current debate that still need to be clarified and made more explicit.

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The submitted work is original and has not been published elsewhere in any form or language (partially or in full).

No data, text, or theories by others has been presented as if they were my own ('plagiarism'). Proper acknowledgements to other works has been given, quotation marks are used for verbatim copying of material, and permissions secured for material that is copyrighted.

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