Language Under Discussion
http://www.ludjournal.org ISSN: 2329-583x

Emotions *do* enter grammar, and the other way around

Ad Foolen[a]

[a] Radboud University, ad.foolen@ru.nl.

DOI: 10.31885/lud.7.1.262

Paper received: 15 May 2025
Published online: 17 July 2025

Abstract. In this discussion note on the focus paper by Martina Wiltschko, entitled *Emotions do not enter grammar because they are constructed (by grammar)*, five theses are selected for discussion. While I agree with the first three theses, I argue that the two theses that together constitute the focus article's title, are formulated in too strong a way. As an alternative, I claim that both emotions and grammar do enter each other's domain, although in a secondary way, i.e. they both have an impact on the other domain without being constitutive of that other domain.

Keywords: emotion, expressivity, emotion words, folk-psychology, grammar, constructivism

1. Introduction

In recent years, Martina Wiltschko has developed a linguistic framework in which both propositional and interactional features of language have been integrated (cf. Wiltschko 2021, 2024a, 2024b, 2025). A natural next step is the question whether and how emotional expressivity could be integrated in the proposed framework. This is indeed the question which is the focus of the paper under discussion here (Wiltschko 2024a). Wiltschko's exploration of this question fits in with the generally increased interest in emotion in the humanities, also called the 'affective turn' (cf. Dukes et al. 2021).

Wiltschko's article is ambitious and challenging, as a focus paper should be, with statements that evoke some comments (see Section 2) and a further-reaching reflection (see Section 3). From the focus paper, I selected five theses for discussion:

(1) Language can be expressive on all levels (p. 44).
(2) There are no dedicated linguistic means for expressing emotion, i.e. emotivity makes use of already existing means (p. 44).

Language Under Discussion, Vol. 7, Issue 1 (August 2024), pp. 63–69
Published by the Language Under Discussion Society

(3) Words for emotions in natural languages are not universal, but are folk-psychological.
(4) A specific part of language is exempted from emotions, and that is grammar, cf. the first part of the title of the focus article: "Emotions do not enter grammar".
(5) The explanation for the previous thesis is that grammar is a precondition for emotions; see the second part of the title: "because they [emotions] are constructed by grammar".

As will become clear in Section 2, I agree with theses 1, 2 and 3. Theses 4 and 5 are more challenging and discussable, as will become clear in Section 3.

2. Agreement with the first three theses

2.1 Language can be expressive on all levels

Throughout the history of linguistics, there has been an awareness that languages have emotional-expressive features (cf. the historiographical overview in Foolen 2022). In the past century, this awareness has grown, cf. Bally ([1913] 1977), Bühler ([1934] 1978), Jakobson (1960), to mention only a few big names, and since then more and more descriptive work has been devoted to expressive features and constructions in a variety of languages (see the overviews in Foolen 2012, 2016; Corver [to appear]; Van Huyssteen [to appear]; the contributions in Gutzmann & Turgay eds. 2025; see also the references to descriptive studies in the focus paper). To give a few examples: In phonology, it is prosody that can easily be used in an expressive way, in morphology diminutives easily take on emotive roles, and in syntax, we find, for example, 'insubordination', i.e. the independent use of a dependent clause, as in, *That he could say such a thing!*, which is often used with expressive intention. In the lexicon, there are emotional interjections, curses and words with strong negative or positive connotation (*enemy*, *angel*). Wiltschko (2024a: 32) states this observation as follows: "[T]he expression of emotions is among the universal functions of language (Bühler 1934) and this expressive function pervades language at all levels."

As Wiltschko stresses, expressive elements typically do not pertain to specific emotions. It is valence (the positive or negative feature of emotion) and sometimes intensity (strong or weak emotion) that are expressed. Only by taking the context of use into consideration, the addressee will be able to find out which specific emotion the speaker intends to express: anger, happiness, disgust, frustration, etc. Note that words like *anger* etc. do not count as expressive, they conceptualize emotion, making it possible to talk about emotions. Expressing emotions and talking about emotions are different things.

2.2 No dedicated means for expressivity

Remarkably, the indication of valence or intensity takes place via linguistic elements that are already there in a language for other purposes, primarily as descriptive means. We observe a kind of 'exploitation' or 'exaptation'. Words with referential meaning can acquire a secondary emotional flavor, called 'connotation'. The same holds in morphology: A diminutive referentially means 'a small exemplar of x', but many diminutive words develop, in addition, a negative or positive flavor. Dependent clauses exist already in syntax, but when used independently, they easily become expressive. One can object that there are interjections, like *wow!* and *oops!*, which are devoid of referential meaning. They can be considered 'dedicated' to emotional expressivity, but at the same time, such interjections are rather marginal in the complex whole of a language.

The claim that emotions use already existing means has been made earlier with regard to the bodily expression of emotion (Darwin [1872] 2009; Bühler 1933). Emotions 'use' the whole body, from the head to the feet, from the skin to inner organs, although some body parts are used more intensively than others. The face is, of course, strongly expressive, knees tremble every now and then, and feet tension may occur in stressful situations. In all cases, however, the primary functions of these body parts is not the expression of emotion. The feet are made for walking, the heart pumps blood, and the skin holds everything together. As said, the face is particularly expressive, but tears that are used for sadness have as their primary function the moistening of the eyes, and joy is expressed by a variety of facial muscles that are already there for other purposes, like opening the mouth for food intake, etc. I thus fully agree with Wiltschko's thesis of "no dedicated means". That emotions prefer such a secondary way of expression, both in the body and in language, requires, of course, an explanation, a point that is beyond the scope of the present paper.

We can add a note similar to the one made at the end of Section 2.1, namely that a bodily symptom of emotivity is often not univocal. An increased heartbeat can be related to fear or to happiness. Again, the situational context will help to interpret the physiological symptom in emotional terms.

2.3 Words for emotions in natural language are 'folk-psychological'

In her focus paper, Wiltschko (2024a: 45) states (with a reference to Wierzbicka 1999): "[E]motion words available in the languages of the world merely correspond to the folk-psychological conceptions of individual emotions and consequently there are significant cross-linguistic differences". Wiltschko will probably not protest if I generalize this folk-psychological status to the lexicon as a whole. In every language, speakers try to conceptualize their experience of the world in some way or other. The color spectrum is divided up in different ways in different languages, and the difference between bushes and trees or between different kinds of family members will not be drawn in all languages in the same way. Some phenomena, like concrete objects or animals, are easier to 'grasp' in words than more abstract phenomena, like sentence structures or emotions, and in those abstract areas, there is more room for 'folk linguistics' and 'folk psychology', respectively. I agree with Wiltschko that a scientific study should not automatically take natural language distinctions as a reliable basis for the scientific analysis of a piece of reality. In Dutch, whales are lexically treated as fish (*walvis*, lit. 'whale fish'), while biology keeps whales apart from the category of 'pisces', categorizing them as mammals instead. The same care should in principle be taken when it comes to the scientific study of emotions. At the same time, we cannot exclude the possibility that the relation between folk taxonomy of animals and plants and the corresponding 'reality' is different in some way or other from the relation between folk words for emotions and the 'real' emotions that are experienced in a cultural community.

3. Discussion of Wiltschko's last two theses

Theses 4 and 5 are identical to the first and second part of the title of the focus paper: (4) Emotions do not enter grammar (5) because they are constructed (by grammar). In both theses, the notion of "grammar" plays a crucial role. Wiltschko does not give an explicit definition of what aspects of language she considers as belonging to grammar. Based on her text, I infer that "gram-

mar" covers at least two features of language. On the one hand grammar deals with syntactic constructions, see pp. 18–30 of her paper on mirative, frustrative and other constructions, to be discussed below in Section 3.1. On the other hand, there is the feature of hierarchical compositionality (see Wiltschko pp. 35-38) as the underlying mechanism for building syntactic constructions, see the discussion in Section 3.2 below. This ambiguity of the notion "grammar" is somewhat confusing, but I will leave this point as it is, without further discussion.

3.1 No emotional-expressive categories in grammar

In descriptive grammars, we find grammatical categories such as mirative, frustrative, apprehensive, and desiderative. In her article, Wiltschko devotes extensive discussion to these categories in subsection 3.3 (p. 18ff). Her main point is that these labels are 'superficial'. According to Wiltschko, a closer, scientific look at the constructions at hand will make clear that they only code for a specific cognitive aspect of the construction, such as 'newness' in the case of what is called 'mirative', or 'intentional state' in the case of what is labeled as 'desiderative' in descriptive grammars. Used in specific contexts, sentences containing grammatical features indicating such cognitive or intentional states are often interpreted in a specific emotional way. As said before, language and context rely on each other when it comes to communicating specific actual emotions. The contribution of the grammatical ingredient in itself, and this is Wiltschko's main point, is not emotional in character.

Reflecting on Wiltschko's insistence on distinguishing between descriptive and scientific terms, we could say that such grammatical categories as desiderative, mirative, frustrative, etc. are folk-psychological (cf. the previous subsection 2.3), or more specifically folk-linguistic. A descriptive grammarian asks native speakers what constructions of a certain type mean and the native speakers' replies lead to a certain descriptive label, proposed by the linguist. A descriptive linguist is a folk linguist. Just as we saw in the case of the biological study of fish, theoretical linguistics may have good reasons for other labels and categorizations than those used by native speakers and descriptive linguists. Indeed, Wiltschko proposes that from the point of view of theoretical grammar, such labels as 'frustrative', etc. should be avoided.

Here we hit upon the central thesis of Wiltschko's article, already present in the title: "Emotions do not enter grammar". As we saw in subsection 2.1, the author agrees that emotional expressivity can be found on all linguistic levels. However, in her view, *grammar* is 'emotion-free'. Emotional categories such as desiderative, frustrative or apprehensive should, thus, be kept out of a scientific grammar.

But should we really 'isolate' grammar from the rest of language structure? Is the situation in grammar that different from the lexicon, as Wiltschko suggests? The primary meaning of a word is mostly not emotional-expressive, but when a specific word is frequently used in emotional contexts, then that contextual aspect can become part of the word's meaning; it is conventionalized as a connotation. Couldn't a similar process take place in relation to grammatical categories? Perhaps the original meaning of an apprehensive construction is indeed just that the mentioned event might be upcoming, without emotional evaluation. But as such announcements of upcoming events often take place in situations of warning, such a construction can easily adopt a negative dimension, which then becomes part of the meaning of the construction. The grammatical labeling of 'apprehensive' is, then, not that superficial and emotion would have entered grammar, although in a secondary way.

3.2 Emotions are constructed (by grammar)

The second part of the focus paper's title is "because they [emotions] are constructed (by grammar)". In Section 2.3, we already supported the idea that words categorize and thus partly 'construct' reality. In particular, non-concrete reality is sensitive to constructional impact. Let's assume that emotions are of the non-concrete reality type. Wharton and De Saussure (2023) support this view. According to them, emotions are vague, "cloud-like", rather than clear-cut, "clock-like" (Wharton and De Saussure 2023: 4): "The first type of content [thought] is precise and, consequently, easily described: in that respect it is clock-like. […] Language allows us to communicate such content with perfect precision". The authors (2023: 14) contrast thought with emotion: "The vaguer, emotional aspects of communication are descriptively ineffable: too nebulous to be paraphrased in propositional terms – cloud-like rather than clock-like."

Not all emotion theorists share this view. A linguist entering the field of emotion research will soon discover that there is 'school building' (cf. Irish 2025 for a succinct overview). On the one hand, there is Basic Emotion Theory (BET), which stresses the innateness of basic emotions, including the assumption of innate specific emotions, such as anger, shame, etc. If BET is right, there is not much room for constructive impact 'from outside'. In contrast, the Theory of Constructed Emotion (TCE) stresses the variability, non-fixedness of emotions, leaving room for co-construction 'from outside', in particular from the side of language and culture. Recent publications supporting the constructionist view are, for example, Mesquita (2022), Dukes and Sander (2024), Barrett and Lida (2024), and Feldman Barrett et al. (2025). The controversy is comparable to what we have seen in linguistics in the controversy between those who assume innate language universals (see Harris [1993] 2021) and those who stress language diversity (see Evans & Levinson 2009).

In the theory of constructed emotions, the constructional impact of language is mostly ascribed to the lexicon. In this view, categorical distinctions made by words are 'projected' on the diffuse reality of emotions. Somewhat unexpectedly, Wiltschko shows strong affinity with the theory of constructed emotion. This is somewhat surprising, as her theoretical affinity in linguistics is closer to those who assume innate grammar (UG, 'Universal Grammar'). One would, then, expect a similar affinity with innate emotions, as assumed in BET. However, instead of looking at the lexical impact on emotions, Wiltschko focuses on another property of language that, in her view, is (also) projected onto emotions: hierarchical compositionality. According to Wiltschko, hierarchical organization is a central and innate property of human language and cognition. In her focus article (Section 5.1), Wiltschko explores the interesting hypothesis that the same hierarchical innate structure can be detected in the structure of emotions. As the author hypothesizes (p. 38), some emotions, disgust for example, are compositionally less complex than others, for example shame. If hierarchical complexity is indeed a feature that can be found in the structure of emotions, then one could assume that this feature entered emotions from the outside, from language. If emotionality shows features of both categorization (as we find in the lexicon) and compositionality (as we find in grammar), and if we assume that these features are projected from language onto emotions, then we can say in a more general way that emotions are 'enlanguaged' (cf. Dreon & Foolen 2025).

The line of thinking we are exploring here, the idea of projection of features from one domain onto another, leads automatically to the question whether compositionality itself is an 'inherent', or even 'innate' feature of human language and cognition, as Wiltschko proposes.

Could it be the case that the 'real' original domain of compositionality is to be found elsewhere, for example in human practices of constructing tools, clothes, etc.? Further research and discussion will be required in order to answer this question.

In conclusion: I agree with the first three of the five theses distilled here from the focus paper. However, the last two, which together build the title of the paper, are, in my opinion, too strongly stated. Instead of saying "Emotions do not enter grammar", I would say that they do enter grammar, although in a way that I have characterized as 'secondary'. Grammar should be understood here as 'constructions'. And instead of saying that "They [emotions] are constructed by grammar", I would just say that grammar has a constructional impact on emotions. In this last statement, grammar means hierarchical compositionality. In future discussions of the relation between language and emotion, these two understandings of "grammar" should be more clearly kept apart.

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Acknowledgement: Many thanks to Esther Pascual, Sergeiy Sandler, and Stef Spronck for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this discussion note, both regarding form (English and formatting) and content.