

Experience, Language, and the Qualitative

Developing Jean-Pierre Cometti's Legacy

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Abstract In this paper, I provide a sketch of Jean-Pierre Cometti's original interpretation of John Dewey's approach to language, emphasizing that it is grounded on a continuistic picture of language as a development of human experience, a naturalistic but non-naturalized conception of experience itself, and a strong focus on the primarily social structure of language and its connection to coordinated action. In the meantime, I suggest that Cometti's continuistic thesis should explicitly address the issue of the 'qualitative' in experience, which is a major theme in both James' and Dewey's works. I suggest integrating his view through a broadly bio-cultural approach to the qualitative dimensions of experience, as distinct from the widespread idea that it is subjective, as well as more primitive and intrinsically foreign to language.

Keywords Language. Qualitative experience. Biocultural approach. Pragmatism. John Dewey.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Tertium datur: *Dewey's Approach to Language as an Integral Part of Experience*. – 3 Qualitative Experience: From Problem to Resource.



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1 Introduction

Jean-Pierre Cometti was a brilliant mind and was able to see with great clarity the potential problems posed by the shift from experience to language that the linguistic turn supported (Cometti 2010; Cometti 2024). The issue was particularly relevant to the transition from Classical Pragmatism to Neopragmatism, although it was not limited to these groups of scholars. It is widely known that, within Pragmatism, the decision to move into the field of language and to abandon the territories of experience was motivated by the need to avoid any foundational tendency that might still be present in the thought of James and Dewey, according to Rorty's provocative claim (Rorty 1982). More generally, Wittgenstein's philosophy, or rather a certain reading of it, was seen to lie at the origin of this momentous philosophical displacement that characterizes analytical philosophy compared to the empiricist tradition.

Cometti realized that this strategy could involve a serious risk: his refined knowledge of Wittgenstein's approach made him particularly attentive to the danger of assuming language as an autonomous field by isolating it from common experience and considering its functioning as separate and independent from the human world. This risk has been great in mainstream philosophy of language, as well as in most linguistics – both inspired by Saussure and by Chomsky, as has become increasingly clear from alternative points of view.¹

As a scholar focused on a view of meaning as use and on the very idea of following a rule as arising and inseparable from a given practice, Cometti cultivated an approach to language as structurally embedded in the complex web of human coordinated actions, in ways of life and in a culturally shared world. It was on the basis of this important legacy that he was able to introduce Rorty's work in France, sensitive to its philosophical challenges on the one hand, and critically aware of its somewhat dangerous implications on the other. He also introduced Richard Shusterman's interesting critique of Rorty's position, which dealt precisely with the alleged opposition between language and experience – in his case mostly bodily experience (Shusterman 2000, particularly the chapters "Pragmatism and Interpretation" and "Beneath Interpretation").² Cometti could see the

1 Within linguistics, the claim against treating language as an independent field of specific objects and procedures is increasingly criticized by supporters of the so-called "linguaging approach" and "radical embodied ecolinguistics" such as Nigel Love, Stephen Cowley, and Didier Bottineau (cf. Steffensen, Cowley 2021). For an overview of the concept of linguaging, see Raimondi 2019.

2 In addition to being a brilliant philosopher, Jean-Pierre Cometti was also an editor and a tireless translator, providing a crucial contribution to the introduction of Rorty's thought in France. He was the editor of the first French translation of Dewey's *Art as*

risks on both sides of the debate and avoid unintended problematic consequences. As he delved deeper into Dewey's thought, he could see from a privileged point of view that the Classical Pragmatists never underestimated the role of language in human life and cognition (cf. Dreon 2022, especially chapters 5 and 6). He understood that their approach to language could be useful for dismantling a certain sterile rigidity in mainstream philosophy of language.

In what follows, I will briefly reconstruct Cometti's view of Dewey's approach, which is based on a continuistic picture of language as a development of human experience, a naturalistic but non-naturalized conception of experience itself, and a strong focus on the primarily social structure of language and its connection to coordinated action (cf. § 1). In the second section, I will suggest that Cometti's continuistic thesis, which I endorse, should explicitly address the issue of the 'qualitative' in experience, which is a major theme in both James' and Dewey's works. I will consider the probable reasons for Jean-Pierre Cometti's marginalization of this issue in relation to Dewey, and suggest integrating his view through a broadly bio-cultural approach to the qualitative dimensions of experience, as distinct from the widespread idea that it is subjective, as well as more primitive and intrinsically foreign to language (§ 2).

2 **Tertium datur: Dewey's Approach to Language as an Integral Part of Experience**

In his essay *Le pragmatisme et la question du langage: les mots et le reste*, published in English translation in the current issue of this journal, Cometti's point is very clear from the title itself: the 'rest', namely the primarily social world in which human language develops, is what it makes it work, insofar as language consists in linguistic interactions within common life contexts and situations.³ Certainly, language can be isolated and abstracted from communicative practices in a shared world for specific purposes, but this distinction must be seen as derived from human cooperative interactions and uses, rather than the other way round – as happens when pragmatics is seen as the application of a pre-defined syntax.

Commenting on *Experience and Nature*, Cometti claims that while John Dewey highlighted the human material and social environment

Experience, published by Gallimard in 2010, a good 76 years after its first English edition. He certainly played an important role in introducing Classical Pragmatism and Neopragmatism into France.

3 In this section, references are to Cometti's *Le pragmatisme et la question du langage*, unless otherwise indicated.

as the effective condition of speech, insofar as it represents the complex development of organic-environmental interactions, these connections have tended to be neglected or marginalized by the so-called 'linguistic turn'. In emphasizing the merits of Dewey's "ecological" approach to language, Cometti has two main polemical targets. On the one hand, he opposes the mainstream analytical philosophy of language, grounded in a hypostatization of meanings as pre-existing entities, independent of linguistic practices and interactions – the traditional picture of meanings as mental or psychic entities, or Platonic ideas *à la* Frege, stigmatized by Wittgenstein in the so-called "myth of the museum" (Perissinotto 2002, VII). A complementary assumption is a form of propositionalism, namely the idea that the function of language is essentially to convey propositional content.

On the other hand, Cometti criticized Rorty and the Neopragmatists, who, while focusing on linguistic practices, had denied a role for experience in order to avoid any alleged residue of foundationalism in Dewey's metaphysics (Rorty 1982). In this way, they inadvertently converged with the analytic philosophers of language, as well as with the Saussurian and Chomskyan linguists, in assuming that the conditions of communication are essentially intra-linguistic. In other words, they ended up by neglecting the structural connections of speech acts with the natural and naturally social environment characterizing the human form of life.

Cometti's claim is that it is the artificial contrast between experience on the one hand and language on the other that produces this kind of misunderstanding – Platonism or mentalism about meaning, propositionalism, and the idea of syntactic autonomy as opposed to semantics and pragmatics, the self-sufficiency of *la langue* as opposed to *la parole*.

Cometti shows the inadequacy of the dualistic paradigm that portrays the Classical Pragmatists as the supporters of experience in contrast to Neopragmatists's preference for language. This alleged opposition does not fit with Dewey's approach to language, which conceives of the meanings of words as arising from and within social practices and cooperative interactions, while at the same time adopting a continuistic view of verbal interactions as developing out of vital adaptive processes. This means that there is no 'language' *per se*, says Cometti, quoting Donald Davidson, namely there is no language apart from human practices: language does not intervene as a medium (or an obstacle) between an independent subject and an allegedly merely 'external' reality. In contrast, Dewey saw language as an integral part of human experience, assumed to take place primarily in the real world rather than in the allegedly merely internal theatre of the mind.

Dewey's primary focus on cooperative actions as the setting in which words are meaningful easily resonates with a scholar trained

in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*: words are not labels, as Locke said, because meanings arise in social interactions and are inseparable from them – or better, they can be isolated afterwards, but it is a 'philosophical fallacy', in Dewey's words, to forget that they are the result of an analytical process serving a specific purpose, and to assume that meanings are independently defined before linguistic practices occur, and to regard the latter as a simple means of conveying the former. This improper operation is bound to produce 'philosophical cramps', in Wittgenstein's words. Cometti points out that for both Dewey and Wittgenstein there are no purely intralinguistic necessary and sufficient conditions for communication; language does not constitute a closed and separate universe that functions as a precondition for communication. On the contrary, the conditions of communication are social, and linguistic utterances are subordinated to social contexts and interactions, they are part of doing things together and acquire their meanings in the shared contexts of such practices. Hence, a number of non-cognitive and non-propositional elements play a role in communication, which appears to be a complex, multifaceted phenomenon: illocutionary force, prosody, aesthetic, and emotional aspects enter into the meaning of human interlocutions. Cometti, insofar as he was a scholar of Musil (Cometti 2001) and deeply interested in linguistic expression, was sensitive to these features of human language, although he did not develop them with specific reference to the legacy of Dewey and the Pragmatists, as I will argue in the next section.

A few more words must be added here on the complementary aspect of the claim that meaning is a function of linguistic interactions and social agency, namely the idea of a continuity of linguistic interactions with living beings' processes of adaptation to their environment. This naturalistic emphasis is clearly more explicit in Dewey's philosophy than in Wittgenstein's approach,⁴ since the former essentially views humans as living beings whose lives are constitutively dependent on the environment in areas ranging from more basic organic functions such as breathing or digestion to more complex behaviours such as seeking companionship or caring for someone. Both the concept of experience itself and the concept of language are framed within a naturalistic, but not reductive, theoretical framework, and are consequently conceived as continuous with organic-environmental transactions that constitute living beings. From this point of view, language is seen as the peculiar, accidental, yet crucial development of organic interactions within the human world. This

⁴ Of course, there are also naturalistic interpretations of Wittgenstein's philosophy (e.g. McGinn 2010; Moyal-Sharrock 2016; Macarthur 2018), but my point here is that Dewey undeniably adopted a stance in favour of naturalism.

result was ultimately derived from the influence of Darwin, which characterized the pragmatist movement from the outset (cf. Pearce 2020), and in particular from a progressive, anti-deterministic reading of his theory provided by Dewey, as Jean-Pierre Cometti argues in another unpublished manuscript from 2015, entitled *Le naturalisme pragmatiste*. This was originally the topic of a course he delivered in Venice, Ca' Foscari, where he had been invited as a visiting professor in 2012 by his colleague and friend Luigi Perissinotto.⁵ In this essay, Cometti emphasizes the many consequences that Dewey (cf. Dewey 2007) and the other Classical Pragmatists draw from Darwin's arguments against the previously dominant idea of the fixity of species: the clear renunciation of a view of evolutionary development as conforming to a teleological plan and, consequently, the recognition of the role of chance and random selection, as well as the refutation of the very idea of searching for an eternal or a priori cause or principle beyond what is happening here and now. Against this background, the Pragmatists reorient the concept of experience along with the concept of behaviour. On the one hand, Cometti reads Dewey's early essay on the *Reflex-Arc Concept in Psychology* as a criticism of the empiricist view of behaviour in mechanical, physicist terms, namely as a causally linear association of purely perceptive stimuli and motor responses. In contrast, Dewey developed an organic model of behaviour and was able to naturalize the concept of experience by grounding it in vital processes, namely the structural interactions between organisms and their environment, through which life is constituted and contributes to the dynamic transformation of the environment from within. In this way, Dewey even got rid of the solipsistic view of experience that dominated phenomenology and later on most analytic philosophy: experience is not the succession of *Erlebnisse* or mental states in the mind of the subject – a noxious view that produced the artificial philosophical problem of the medium connecting subjective experience with external reality.⁶ Dewey instead adopted an idea of experience as residing in what happens in the world out there, in the course of the countless organic-environmental exchanges that make up life. From this point of view, language itself takes on a naturalistic character. It appears as a peculiar, random but crucial development of organic-environmental interactions, insofar as they occur within a naturally social environment. It is part of the adaptive processes, Cometti claims, that operate under the conditions of shared

⁵ I was fortunate enough to attend Jean-Pierre Cometti's lectures, and I still remember some of the exchanges I had with him after the class, which were particularly significant for me and my reading of Pragmatism.

⁶ See Pierre Steiner's extensive work on the use of intentionality for this purpose (Steiner 2022).

experience. In other words, language is primarily a function of life and an active tool for interacting in a highly social environment. Consequently, meanings arise out of the communicative context of actions and reactions through which humans do things together, literally by making something common (Dewey 1989).⁷

Jean-Pierre Cometti stressed that for Dewey, meaning and language are primarily social in nature, shaping and being shaped by peculiarly human ways of living and acting. He also pointed out the connection between the bodily, sensorimotor dimension of action and linguistic interaction.⁸ However, in his reflections on the pragmatist view of language, he tended to marginalize the qualitative, aesthetic, or affective dimension of experience, which is, on the contrary, a crucial issue in the Classic Pragmatists' conception of experience – especially James' and Dewey's – and, as I will argue in the next section, is particularly important for overcoming the alleged divide between experience and language.

3 Qualitative Experience: From Problem to Resource

Jean-Pierre Cometti dealt extensively with the qualitative dimensions of language, with particular reference to the topic of expression and the expressiveness of words in Musil and Wittgenstein (see Steiner in this issue). However, his references to the qualitative or aesthetic characterization of experience among the Pragmatists are limited, as already indicated. Yet, the Classical Pragmatists' emphasis on qualitative experience can hardly be underestimated. This is a recurrent claim in William James' writing: in *The Principles of Psychology*, he famously called for the "reinstatement of the vague" to its proper place in philosophy (James 1981, 246), and referred to the "aesthetic sphere of the mind" (James 1884, 188), as the dimension neglected by philosophers and psychologists, who mostly concentrated on its cognitive features; in his *Essays on Radical Empiricism*, he openly argued for the place of "affectional facts" in experience (James 1976, Ch. 5); and throughout his work he emphasized the crucial role of feelings, interests, and temperament as selective principles orienting human

⁷ Although Cometti does not refer to the debate on scientific naturalism and the naturalizing trend in analytic philosophy, his interpretation makes it very clear that Dewey's naturalism is far from such an approach. Dewey described his own stance as cultural naturalism, emphasizing the continuity between nature and culture as well as the emergent character of cultural features and their feedback effects on earlier forms of organic-environmental interactions (Dewey 1991). On this point, see Margolis 2002; Godfrey-Smith 2014; Dreon 2019; Bernstein 2020.

⁸ On this issue, see the recent work by Di Paolo, Cuffari, De Jaegher 2018 in the field of enactivist research.

beings' experience of the surrounding environment (cf. Bordogna 2001). Dewey's work is also characterized by a strong commitment to a complex view of experience, including its primarily qualitative, affective, or aesthetic features. Limiting the focus here to *Experience and Nature* – Dewey's masterpiece, on which Cometti himself chose to concentrate in the paper, published in English translation in this issue of the journal – the emphasis on qualitative or primary experience and its 'esthetic' qualities is impressive. As is well known, Dewey endorsed an instrumental view of cognition, which took into account the crucial role of inquiry. In his view, it represents the reflective phase in experience, through which people analyse the various features that make up raw experience as a whole and find a solution when situations become problematic and they do not know what to do or how to behave. In other words, reflective experience begins with the raw material of experience itself and returns to it to test it and predict things, to regulate it for practical purposes, and to enrich and extend its meanings. Nevertheless, Pragmatism is far from exhausting itself in a form of instrumentalism. The other side of the instrumental view of cognition is that it does not cover the complex variety of experience: things are perceived primarily because they have an immediate effect on the life of the organism; first of all, they are experienced qualitatively – they are tender, colourful, uncomfortable, and irritating – they are suffered or enjoyed, immediately blamed or praised, or simply tolerated. This reference to feeling and being felt as affecting one's life, rather than knowing in the sense of inquiring – feeling pleasures, pains, and the wide variety of possibilities in between them – explains Dewey's use of the word 'esthetic' to characterize qualitative experience.⁹ At the same time, 'quality' does not refer to properties that belong either to objects or to the subject, but to the kind of actual interaction that takes place between a living being and its environment. In sum, Dewey and James called for explicit philosophical attention to the human experience of things as part of real situations which, in their entirety, include the living beings who are having the experience and, consequently, are to a greater or smaller degree at stake in them. But when situations become indeterminate and past habits of interaction no longer work, immediate enjoyment or suffering is postponed and more reflective phases of experience open up, in which objects are isolated from the whole situation, refined, and reorganized for practical purposes.

So, what are the reasons for Jean-Pierre Cometti's marginalization of the Deweyan issue of qualitative experience, which, from his

⁹ Note that Dewey adopted the word 'esthetic' rather than 'aesthetic' in both Dewey 1981 and Dewey 1989.

point of view, constitutes both the background to the processes of inquiry and their final outcome?

Certainly, Cometti was very wary of the risks posed by a claim in favour of immediate experience – an assumption that could provide a strong argument for Rorty’s interpretation of Dewey’s *Experience and Nature* as a metaphysical, i.e. still foundational, attempt. Cometti feared a slide into a kind of phenomenological perspective; although Dewey’s conception of qualitative experience is larger than bodily experience, Cometti makes this point explicit in his essay on pragmatic naturalism, when he warns that the emphasis on somatic experience could represent the umpteenth version of the myth of direct access to “the (alleged) original”. In considering this threat, Cometti refers explicitly to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the flesh, as well as to positions à la Foucault that revolve around the idea of an allegedly primary (but inevitably lost) corporeal experience, tragically confiscated by language and its use at the service of political power. In these references – which oversimplify both Merleau-Ponty’s and Foucault’s views, but without misinterpreting their spirit – another threat emerges, namely the idea that the original is ineffable, that it is foreign or at least prior to language. The risk, then, is to interpret the Deweyan distinction between qualitative experience and reflective experience as a distinction between perception and language or between experience *tout court* and language (cf. Cometti 2002).

Although there have been readings of Dewey’s primary experience as pre-linguistic and alien to language (Johnson 2007; Henning 2022), I suggest that his philosophy offers a different way out.¹⁰ The point is to show that language is not divorced from the qualitative, from what he calls immediate or primary experience; on the contrary, linguistic interactions involve important qualitative features, while, conversely, human qualitative experience occurs within an enlanguaged environment, shaped by and shared through broadly linguistic practices. To avoid this last version of the dualistic opposition between experience and language, some important resources can be drawn from the Classic Pragmatists’ philosophical contributions.

Firstly, Dewey did not adopt a mystical or dogmatic conception of the qualitative in experience, as something more original than reason and language, and fundamentally alien to them. Rather, he assumed a broadly biological view of the qualitative features of experience, along the line already traced by William James, I believe, and essentially derived from the influence of Darwin’s theory. Humans

10 Of course, the question of interpretation is very complex. Among other things, Dewey himself uses the term “ineffable” in one circumstance to qualify primary experience, but at the same time he excludes that this expression could be read as having “mystical” implications (Dewey 1981, 74-5). For a deflationary interpretation within a more detailed account of the issue, see Dreon 2014.

feel the situations in which they are embedded primarily as friendly, dangerous, comfortable, welcoming, harmful or boring, because they are not independent subjects in a void, but living beings whose lives depend on their interactions with their environment at a variety of levels, from mere survival to flourishing. Hence, the natural and naturally social environment in which and through which human beings constitute themselves always has a stronger or weaker impact on them, is immediately felt to have an impact on their lives, and is immediately praised or blamed as such (Dreon 2022). Of course, the immediate enjoyment or suffering of the surroundings can be deferred and analytically reconsidered if something does not work in habitual behaviour and interactions. But the results of a reflective engagement with a primarily holistic experience – knowledge that is intended as a sediment of shared meanings, beliefs, and habits of response, rather than as an ongoing process – will become part of the experience as it is directly enjoyed or suffered, contributing to its enrichment or to impoverishing it by reaffirming hardened meanings and dysfunctional habits.

Secondly, in the case of human animals, it is crucial to acknowledge that organic sensibility does not take place in a silent world, but within a network of broadly linguistic practices and cooperative interactions that are already in place when individuals begin to perceive the world around them, and to which they are entrained from the very beginning. Following Dewey's insight that behaviour is not only a function of the individual organism, but also of the environment (Dewey 1988), it should be concluded that being embedded in a world of enlanguaged, enculturated practices has crucial consequences for human sensibility. Hence, it could be said that organic sensibility has been transformed by the advent of speech (Lorimer 1929), that it has been fortuitously but irreversibly reshaped by human beings' peculiar ecology (Dreon 2022).

Moreover, the Classical Pragmatists, especially George Mead, supported a view of verbal communication as a development of affective conversations of gestures, in which emotions function as regulative principles for coordinating one's own conduct with the interlocutor's actions. From this point of view, language appears to be continuous with aesthetic-emotional communication and still largely operates through sensitive, aesthetic, affective, or qualitative features. This is not to revive the traditional idea that ordinary speech, as well as poetry at a more refined level, expresses emotions in the sense of conveying allegedly purely pre-linguistic states of mind. Rather, the emotional tone of a conversation remains central to the regulation of conduct and mutual interactions, even when syntactic and semantic registers become dominant, or when vocabulary becomes highly sophisticated.

Ultimately, Dewey's distinction between primarily qualitative and reflective experience is dynamic and functional, which is to say that it cannot be taken as defined once and for all (Johnson, Shulkin 2023). On the contrary, what we have here are different phases in the continuum of experience and, as noted above, the results of past inquiries are incorporated into new kinds of interactions that can be suffered or enjoyed in turn. More precisely, I would argue that the distinction should not be interpreted as linear and hierarchical – namely, by considering qualitative experience as more fundamental than reflection and cognition. In contrast, Dewey and the Pragmatists (particularly Mead and Frank Lorimer) saw that the emergence of language produced changes in the continuum of life and a reorganization of organic sensibility in a highly socialized and enculturated environment. Hence, qualitative and more reflective phases of experience appear to be mutually conditioned, and their relations appear to be circular.

More importantly, for the issue at stake in this paper, the distinction between qualitative experience and inquiry should not be seen as equivalent to the alleged opposition between experience and language, but rather concerns different phases of human enlanguaged experience, sometimes overwhelming, as in the case of an intense quarrel with one's partner, or more focused on analytical details, as in the case of having to translate a Latin text. In both cases, there is a kind of dynamic oscillation and mutual influence between the two registers, which contribute in different ways to making the interaction meaningful.

To conclude with a final claim, Cometti was right to say that Dewey did not succumb to the reification of language and its magic. To his brilliant insight I add that Dewey did not even succumb to a dogmatic, ineffable conception of the qualitative in experience. Jean-Pierre Cometti's naturalistic reading of Dewey and the Pragmatists should be recovered and further developed to provide a richer picture of human experience and a more complex view of human language.

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