



Can grammar embrace emotions?

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Abstract. In this discussion note, I notice an asymmetry in the argumentation used by Martina Wiltschko against considering emotions to be part of grammar: When examining the semantic import of grammatical constructions, emotional meanings are viewed as secondary, as “not entering grammar”, if the constructions in question can sometimes be used without expressing the emotional attitude associated with them. Referential and cognitive meanings, by contrast, are grandfathered in, without any attempt to put them to a similar test. I briefly discuss the example of the Russian diminutive, as a case in which the referential meaning of a construction (smallness) would not fare better than the emotional one (endearment) if the two were compared to one another on an equal footing. I argue that the divergent treatment of these two types of meaning is not motivated by the empirical data but rather reflects a deep theoretical commitment. I conclude by pointing out that if emotions are less ‘at home’ in grammar than referential meanings, this has more to do with the way grammar has been traditionally conceived of than with the nature of human emotions.

Keywords: language and emotion; grammatical structure; diminutives in Russian

Martina Wiltschko's (2024) arguments regarding emotions and grammar are thought-provoking. The combination of a formal approach to grammar with a view of emotions themselves as constructed is unusual and opens interesting potential avenues for further research.

And yet, I could not help but notice a certain asymmetry in how Wiltschko is treating different sorts of evidence to support her empirical claim, also reproduced in the title of the article, that emotions do not enter grammar (Section 3 of Wiltschko 2024 is primarily devoted to the attempt to establish this point). Put simply, the sort of evidence Wiltschko counts against an emotional interpretation of the various grammatical categories she looks at (especially in Section

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3.3) is never discussed when competing (e.g., referential, cognitive or epistemic) interpretations of these, and other, categories are being examined. To “enter grammar”, emotions are required to jump through hoops that traditional cognitive categories are exempt from.

This asymmetry is, to be sure, not in any way unique to Wiltschko’s argument. Quite on the contrary, it follows from a long-standing tradition in linguistics and the philosophy of language, which Wiltschko, like many scholars, is an heir to. This tradition also supplies apparent justifications for treating referential meanings as privileged (I will briefly touch on those in due course). But in the end, as I would argue, it is really our traditional theoretical understanding of grammar that excludes emotions, rather than anything inherent in the emotions themselves, or in the human linguistic capacity as such.

The argument in Wiltschko’s focus article is sophisticated. She is careful to note that the non-existence of grammatical categories encoding emotion is not something that can be definitively proven (Wiltschko 2024, 16). And yet, when in her Section 3.3 she goes on to discuss potential counterexamples to her main claim, the asymmetry in question kicks into gear.¹ Thus, the claim that miratives and exclamatives (discussed on pp. 18–21) do not encode the emotion of surprise is supported by referring to uses of such constructions without the speaker, apparently, intending to express surprise as an emotion, but only the epistemic state of receiving unexpected information. However, the question of whether there are also cases in which such grammatical categories are used to express the emotion of surprise without the corresponding epistemic state is never posed.² The same goes for all other potential counterexamples Wiltschko examines.

A little case study: Russian diminutives

What if we do try to level the proverbial playing field? Let me briefly consider one case, where the emotional content of a grammatical construction can, and often does, appear in actual use, without the corresponding epistemic state making an appearance at all. Like Soares Da Silva’s (2024) note in this issue, with the arguments in which I generally agree, I will consider diminutives,³ in a language that makes rich and varied use of them. In my case this will be Russian.⁴

When discussing diminutives and augmentatives, Wiltschko (2024, 25–26) repeats the same argument pattern: diminutives can carry different emotional meanings, or none at all, so the emotional meaning cannot be the core meaning of the grammatical category. Instead, it is the

¹ Rivera Bobadilla’s (2024) discussion note in this issue, which aims to support and supplement Wiltschko’s (2024) focus article, offers an even more clearcut example of this asymmetry, with distinctly different kinds of evidence used when examining emotional and non-emotional meanings.

² Admittedly, surprise is not a very good example to make my point, since it is an emotion that is, by definition, very closely linked to an epistemic state. One obvious example of a ‘decoupling’ would occur in the case of an ironic use of surprise markers. The epistemic state of receiving unexpected information is absent in such cases, but, to be sure, so is the genuine emotion of surprise. Surprise is, however, an excellent example to demonstrate another relevant point, namely, that there is no neat and clearcut distinction to be drawn between emotional and epistemic or cognitive meanings in the first place. In real human experience, epistemic states are intimately associated with emotional states and vice versa.

³ Diminutives may not technically count as “grammatical categories” in Wiltschko’s theoretical framework, but since she explicitly considers them as a potential counterexample to her claim in the focus article, I assume they are relevant to our discussion.

⁴ The examples I will be discussing here are all in Russian, a language I know well and can analyze in detail and with nuance, but it appears many of the points I will be making hold true for how the diminutive is used in a variety of other languages too. Esther Pascual, in personal communication, pointed me to a variety of examples illustrating the same points in Catalan, Spanish, and Dutch.

sense of referring to small size that is taken to be the core meaning of the diminutive. This implies that, to count as having an emotional meaning, the diminutive has to evoke this meaning *invariably*, but to count as having a referential meaning, it is apparently enough for it to invoke this meaning on occasion.

Let me, first of all, fully acknowledge that Wiltchko is right in her empirical observation: even though some tone of endearment is a very common and dominant feature of the Russian diminutive, the rich usage of this construction is by no means limited to this one function. There are pejorative or dismissive uses of the diminutive in Russian, and, indeed, one can also sometimes (albeit quite rarely) find emotionally neutral uses, simply marking some object as small.

But now let us put the shoe on the other foot. Can the referential meaning, namely smallness, be the core meaning of this grammatical category, if judged by the same criteria? Let us look at a few examples.

To begin with, the referential meaning is supposed to apply to the noun that takes the diminutive form. In actual usage, though, we regularly find the Russian diminutive in use without any implication that the noun taking the diminutive is small. One case in point is speech directed to children, especially young children, into which people would often bend over backwards to insert a diminutive. In one example I recall hearing on the street a few years ago, a woman said to a toddler (presumably her grandchild):

- (1) *idiom* *v* *tenio-chik*
let's.go into shade-DIM
'let's go into the shadie-shade.'

There was nothing small about the shade in question. Moreover, the Russian word *ten'*, ('shade'), is not normally used in a diminutive form at all, and the form this speaker used (possibly even invented on the fly) is quite irregular. Nevertheless, she felt it was necessary to use the diminutive because she was addressing a young child.

In this example, the emotional (and more broadly speaking, communicative) import of the diminutive was very much present, while the referential one was not really relevant. Still, you could perhaps claim that the smallness of the addressee, not the emotional tone specific to communication with a young child, is what called for the diminutive to be used. That would be a stretch (consider that no such speech pattern has been observed in addressing adults suffering from skeletal dysplasia, despite their small stature),⁵ but, in fact, examples where this claim would not be applicable abound.

Take one example from the novel *Lame Fate* (*Khromaia Sud'ba* in the original) by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky,⁶ where one character offers to serve another some *kon'iachok*, that is,

⁵ The same speech pattern has, however, been observed in interactions between medical and nursing staff and their adult and elderly patients. Esther Pascual (p. c.) has noted several interactions in Spanish, Catalan, and Dutch, where the diminutive was used in a similar fashion in such settings, and I can also confirm this, based on my own experience, for Russian. This, again, indicates that the emotional core of parent-child (or carer-care-recipient) relationship, as well as the implied power imbalance such relationships come with, is what the diminutive indicates here, not the referential sense of smallness.

⁶ I used an online version of the novel's Russian text, posted on a website dedicated to the work of its authors. The original was serialized in 1986 and published as a book in 1989 (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel'). An English translation (by Maya Vinokur) has been published by Chicago Review Press in 2020. The diminutive in question can be found at: https://strugacki.ru/book_32/1377.html.

cognac (*kon'iak*), but with a diminutive. Both characters are middle-aged men. One of them, the narrator, also goes on later in the same scene to mention his own bottle of *kon'iachok* at home, which he hopes to drink that evening. There is no implication that the amount of cognac to be consumed is supposed to be small (in fact, there might even be a hint of the opposite implication, though this is not a clearcut case). Instead, the diminutive is used here precisely because of its emotional import, related to the diminutive's standard emotional meaning of endearment. By using the diminutive, these characters signal that they expect to savor and enjoy the drink. By implication—and this was the point of using the diminutive in that particular scene—the diminutive signals that the cognac in question is of superior quality.

This use of the diminutive is not some kind of quirk or curiosity and is not limited to any specific category of objects (such as, say, alcoholic drinks). It is perfectly normal in everyday Russian conversation to apply the diminutive to various nouns to mark some kind of liking one takes to the objects in question, to mark them as especially good or enjoyable.

Possibly because of such implicatures becoming standard, we also find the diminutive in Russian sometimes used as a general-purpose intensifier. Here is an example from a social media post, next to a photo of a van with a large pile of boxes attached to its roof:⁷

- (2) *nichego-shen'ki seb-e kak zagruzil-i Toyot-u Voksi*
 nothing-DIM itself.DAT how PFV-load.up-PL Toyota-GEN Voxy
 'wowie, did they load up that Toyota Voxy!'

The diminutive in this example is attached to the exclamative *nichego sebe*, and functions as a way to intensify the astonishment it expresses, astonishment at the *large* size of that pile of boxes, not at its *small* size. Nothing about this use of the diminutive (which is, again, perfectly normal and typical) has anything to do with the referential meaning of smallness that is supposed to be *the* meaning of the diminutive.

Are we then to conclude that, at least in this case, referential meanings do not enter grammar either?

Should we consider referential meanings to be privileged?

Let me clarify my stance in this discussion. Unlike Wiltschko, I do not adhere to any flavor of the Generativist program in linguistics, nor to other theoretical and philosophical positions akin to it (such as truth-conditional semantics). It is definitely *not* my intention to argue that Wiltschko should have incorporated the emotional meanings of some grammatical categories into her generative grammatical theory. In the case of the Russian diminutive, I am not actually arguing that the emotional meaning of 'endearment' is "directly encoded" (Wiltschko 2024, 26) in it (if anything, I'm rather arguing that the referential meaning of 'smallness' is not directly encoded in the diminutive either). Instead, I am trying to make a much broader point about how meaning works in language, for which emotional meanings serve as a useful illustration.

But this is not to say that our views on meaning are entirely incommensurate with each other. There is a common ground that I hope we can both agree on. Namely, we can agree that meanings can be associated with linguistic units—words, morphemes grammatical constructions, grammatical categories, or whatever else—based on their actual pattern of usage. Regard-

⁷ https://vk.com/wall-47688450_3105181.

less of our underlying philosophical analysis of what meaning is (which might diverge significantly), we should be able to agree that, say, the English word “dog” can only be said to mean what it means (primarily, a domesticated canine) if English speakers regularly use it to convey that meaning to one another (in this case, to designate said animal in their speech). Had this not been the case, the word would be said to mean something else, or perhaps to be polysemous or to have no clear meaning at all.

What does this imply for our case study of the Russian diminutive? Taken at face value (and, in the final analysis, I would argue that it should indeed be taken at face value), this basic principle, connecting meaning to usage, entails that endearment is clearly *a* meaning that the Russian diminutive carries, and that we are no less justified in saying the Russian diminutive has this emotional meaning than in saying it has the meaning of small size. In fact, since conveying endearment is probably the most common use of the diminutive in Russian, and that it is by far more common than using the diminutive to neutrally (or even non-neutrally) refer to small size, we would be justified in claiming that endearment is the *main* meaning of the Russian diminutive, while smallness is a secondary meaning this grammatical construction has.

And from this, it would follow that, at least in this particular case, emotion does enter grammar after all. Perhaps it does not enter Grammar as a term of art within the Generative Grammar tradition, but then it would be the *theoretical* constraints introduced by this tradition that block emotion’s entrance into grammar, not *empirical* data about how people use their language. In terms of empirical facts about how people speak, it appears some grammatical constructions can indeed be used primarily to convey emotional meanings.

What reasons could motivate us to reject this conclusion? The standard retort here is that referential meanings should by right be treated as privileged. This claim usually takes the form of a distinction, such as the distinction between “meaning” and “use”, or between “semantics” and “pragmatics” (and there are several other similarly functioning pairs in the literature, going back to the Saussurean *langue* and *parole*, and beyond).

So, in the case of the English word “dog”, which I used as an example above, its referential meaning (domesticated canine) would be considered its *meaning*, belonging to *semantics*, it is what this word “directly encodes”. The same word is also frequently *used* to refer pejoratively to a person, to hurl an insult at someone, but this latter sense should be considered a (mere) *use* of the word, belonging to *pragmatics*. It can also be *used* in many other ways on various occasions, but that doesn’t change its *meaning*, which is referential.

This distinction should by no means be taken as self-evident. There are excellent reasons to reject the distinction outright, and many (for example, the great majority of Cognitive Linguists) indeed reject it.⁸ But even if, for the sake of the argument, we would allow the distinction itself to be made, there still remains the question of how one should determine which usage belongs to meaning or semantics, and which to use or pragmatics. What criteria should one apply?

If the criteria are strictly empirical, the meaning/use distinction will fail to produce the desired effect. Lexicographers dutifully list the pejorative sense of “dog” in all major dictionaries,⁹

⁸ For me, the strongest argument against this distinction is methodological. It can be used (and has in fact been used, e.g., in truth-conditional semantics) to insulate one’s pet semantic theory from any risk of empirical refutation: whenever a counterexample comes up, it can be effortlessly relegated to pragmatics and subsequently ignored.

⁹ See, for example, Merriam-Webster (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dog>; accessed 13 Jul. 2026). Sense 2a for the noun “dog” reads, “a worthless or contemptible person”.

alongside many other senses, so long as they are attested frequently enough to pass a certain threshold. The same approach would list the emotional function of expressing endearment as the *primary* sense of the diminutive in Russian. This is even reflected in the standard Russian grammatical nomenclature, which refers to diminutive suffixes as “*umen’shitel’no-laskatel’nye suffiksy*” (lit. ‘diminutively-caressing suffixes’). As with the multiple definitions of ‘dog’, this primary emotional sense of the diminutive would be listed alongside many additional senses, including, to be sure, also the referential one (referring to the noun it modifies as having small size), but not affording it any special status.¹⁰

This is why the criteria applied to determine what is a *meaning* and what is a *use* are usually theoretical or philosophical, rather than empirical. They rely on a venerable tradition of thinking about language, going back all the way to Aristotle’s *Organon* (Aristotle 1984, 1:3–314). This tradition views words as signifying forms (Aristotelian forms, broken down into the Aristotelian *Categories*: nouns signify substances, adjectives signify qualities, etc.) and views statements, to somewhat oversimplify, as signifying a combination of such forms in a single object. Within this framework, referential meanings must indeed be treated as privileged, because language is understood to be, above all, a means for referring to objects and making statements that express logical propositions. All other functions of language (including communication and emotional expression) are thought of as secondary, belonging to the periphery of pragmatic use, rather than to the core of semantic meaning.

And yet, with all due respect to the Stagirite, the fact that a certain conception of language is traditional does not yet make it correct. Aristotelian notions about astronomy had also enjoyed great respect among scholars for two millennia, until at some point they turned out to be fundamentally wrong-headed. The empirical evidence led us elsewhere. Why, then, shouldn’t empirical evidence be allowed to lead us elsewhere in the study of language?¹¹

Are there *empirical* grounds for giving referential meanings a privileged status? Scholars could, of course, try to ground the privilege afforded to referential meanings in the requirements of the grammatical theory they adhere to, under the assumption that the theory as a whole can be empirically grounded. The validity of this empirical grounding is itself, however, a matter of heated debate (see, e.g., Evans and Levinson 2009; Levinson and Evans 2010, and the ensuing discussion). And in any case, it would be difficult to appeal to such grounding without committing the fallacy of circular reasoning. At the very least, one would have to make sure the meaning/use distinction (in one of its many variants) is not itself already, openly or tacitly, presupposed at any stage in screening and evaluating the empirical evidence being adduced. That is rarely, if ever, the case.¹²

¹⁰ It would also list additional or secondary *emotional* meanings (e.g., ‘expressing disdain or contempt’). Wiltschko (2024, 26) appears to view the conflicting valence of these emotions as indicating that the emotional meaning cannot be a core meaning of the diminutive. But if the same word can have multiple referential meanings, sometimes even contrary ones (in contronyms), why can’t a grammatical construction have two distinct, and even contrasting, emotional meanings?

¹¹ The evidence against the broader conception of language that Aristotle inaugurated, beyond the narrow question of emotion in grammar, is truly overwhelming and can literally be found practically in any utterance people make. But going into this evidence here would require me to write a very different, and much longer, text, so I will leave it at that.

¹² One potential avenue for providing empirical grounding to the (supposed) privileged status of referential meanings could perhaps be through the diachronic study of grammaticalization. If it turns out that referential mea-

Is the issue with emotions or with our notion of grammar?

Imagine, for a moment, a twin Earth, where people speak the same languages we do here on our planet, but on which Martina Wiltschko's doppelganger has published a different article than the one she has published in this issue—an article arguing that cognitive categories, not emotions, are the ones that do not enter grammar (because they are structured by grammar). That article would use the same evaluation criteria applied by 'our' Wiltschko, only the roles of emotional and cognitive or referential meanings would be reversed. The doppelganger's article would take it for granted that emotion can be expressed by grammatical categories but would raise doubts about those other meanings (or maybe just some of them, say epistemic meanings). She would consider potential counterexamples to her claim and show that in all such cases you can use the grammatical category in question in ways that do not agree with its proposed non-emotional meaning, and would conclude that non-emotional meanings may be expressed by these grammatical categories, but are never directly encoded in them.

Admittedly, this doppelganger would have her work cut out for her. As the real Wiltschko (2024, 16–18) points out, general surveys of grammatical categories rarely include any categories dedicated to the expression of emotions, while categories associated with non-emotional meanings can be found in abundance in any grammar book. The doppelganger would have had to go over many thousands of such potential counterexamples, putting a large team of co-authors to work on the project for decades, inflating her paper to the length of a large encyclopedia. Mind you, I do think she would have been able to find a way to disqualify all the potential counterexamples. There are always cases in which grammatical constructions are used in a manner that does not fit what's written on the grammar-book label. But after reading a few thousand pages of that magnum opus, one would inevitably start wondering what's the point.

Still, why is this the case? Does it have something to do with the nature of emotions? I don't think so.

Consider the Russian diminutive again. As I said from the outset, it does not always express endearment. But, as I have also shown, neither is it always used to express smallness. If anything, the emotional meaning is associated with this construction more robustly than the referential one. So, what *does* it mean?

In and of itself, it means nothing. Strictly speaking, meaning is not something that inherently belongs to a linguistic unit as such. Even more strictly speaking, the linguistic unit itself is a theoretical fiction, a product of how we learned to catalogue patterns of actual speech and communication. Meaning is something that we, human beings, make when interacting with one another. The fullness of the situational context is required for understanding what an utterance means, a context that very much includes the emotions we express (and emotions are themselves not merely constructed, but situated and situational). The way a grammatical construction or

nings commonly grammaticalize into syntactic constructions and morphology, while emotional meanings never do, that could lend overall empirical support to Wiltschko's thesis. This is not an argument Wiltschko appears to be using herself, and I am not aware of studies that attempted to settle this question. But here, too, methodological caution is warranted. Consider the rather common origin of diminutive morphology in nouns referring to a child (cf. the mention of this origin, though not quite in the diachronic sense in question, in Wiltschko 2024, 26). It would be tempting to determine that the *referential* meaning of 'child' has grammaticalized into the diminutive. But in fact, the diminutive did not take from the noun its main referential meaning. Instead, it inherited other meanings associated with 'child', meanings in which 'child' could function as a metaphor. And those meanings include the emotional notions of endearment and belittlement just as much as the non-emotional notion of smallness.

category, or any other unit, can be said to contribute to this meaning-making process has to do with various past meaning-making events it is associated with in our minds. In our example, the Russian diminutive has a lot of different notions associated with the various concrete examples of its use. These include endearment, smallness, childhood, caregiver–care-recipient relationships, belittlement, enjoyment, increased intensity, even increased difficulty of pronunciation (potentially relevant to its role as an intensifier). These associations have a family-resemblance, to use a Wittgensteinian term, but there is no single core “directly encoded” meaning that this construction inherently carries. It is the broader context that makes some of the things we associate with the diminutive more relevant to a given meaning-making event, and others less so. The diminutive itself is neither referential nor emotional. It is just a tool people use to make themselves understood by other people.¹³

For various historical reasons,¹⁴ our dominant linguistic theories, very much including theories of grammar, have placed a strong emphasis on denotation, truth conditions, and what, in our discussion here, is labeled ‘referential meaning’. It is not emotion that stands out for not “entering grammar”. It is rather grammar, as we have become accustomed to thinking of it, that does not do an adequate job of accounting for the (immense) role that emotional expression plays in language. The asymmetry we saw on display in Wilschko’s focus article is part of a long-standing bias she has inherited from her predecessors.

So, perhaps, instead of imagining a twin Earth scenario at the beginning of this section, I should have invited us to imagine an alternative history, one in which theoretical accounts have focused from the very outset on carving up the phenomenon of language in a different way. Expressing and communicating emotion is one of the core functions of human communication and, indeed, animal communication too. People can express their emotional state in all human languages, on a variety of linguistic levels (from the prosodic cue to high-order rhetorical structure).¹⁵ We could have developed a different tradition of linguistic scholarship, one that prioritizes emotional meanings over referential meanings, or perhaps one that does not pick favorites. Such a tradition would look unrecognizably different from anything we have today. Perhaps we would have linguistic theories that primarily differentiated between utterances by the social and institutional contexts in which they were made, classified them based on their emotional

¹³ To avoid misunderstanding, I am not claiming that grammatical constructions are a kind of entity that does not bear meaning. Instead, my position is that meaning properly belongs to the process of human interaction, and that, to the extent a linguistic unit can be said to be a real bearer of meaning, such a unit should be the complete utterance, in Bakhtin’s (1986) sense (e.g., a turn of talk). Skillful speakers and their audiences know how to shape and construct their utterances to achieve their communicative goals (in most cases) well enough for their practical purposes. All grammatical and lexical units and structures are best thought of as units and structures we identify within utterances upon second reflection. We can consider such units as tools we use as part of the full utterances we exchange with one another, and the range of communicative effects we can achieve with these tools can be thought of as the range of their meanings. This approach stands in contrast to the more common tendency in linguistics (and even more so in the philosophy of language) to reify our linguistic analytical apparatus, that is, to view grammatical and lexical units as real-world entities and to view these units, or some of them, as the fundamental bearers of disembodied meaning.

¹⁴ Including, for example, the written language bias in linguistics (Linell 2005). But also more contingent factors, such as the centrality of Aristotelian logic to education in Europe throughout the Middle Ages.

¹⁵ There is one kind of “languages” in which emotion cannot be expressed: formal languages. This fact, together with the easily observable prominence of emotion in animal communication, might motivate some to exclude emotion from their understanding of “language” (or “grammar”) *a priori*. Such an exclusion, however, would, again, reflect a theoretical commitment, not an empirical conclusion.

import, and divided them up in accordance with the intonation contours employed by the speakers, while the objects the speakers referred to in the process would have been viewed as auxiliary or ‘paralinguistic’. Strange as all this may seem to a modern professional linguist, things could have gone that way.

In the end (and I realize that Wiltschko, as a Generative linguist, might disagree with me on this) grammars are just descriptive tools, theoretical constructions, which we create to help us make sense of the holy mess that is language. They reflect languages to the best of our limited understanding, always abstracting from a wealth of detail and from an ever-present multitude of inconvenient counterexamples.

If emotions have trouble entering grammar, perhaps the real reason for this is that grammar has not been constructed to welcome them in.

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