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Interjections and the Parts of Speech in the Ancient Grammarians

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Abstract

This paper considers the emergence of the category of interjection in ancient theories of grammar from the Greek and Roman world, beginning with Aristotle. The category arose only slowly and not without a number of false steps: its long and difficult gestation reflects the apparently marginal, perhaps even independent (and thus difficult to analyse) position of interjections in the grammar of sentences. The history of the interjection as a category is, it is argued, essentially the overall history of parts of speech both as a set and as the individual members of that set, and this paper adopts the view that it is instructive to reconsider how the ancients and their successors went about tackling what is even now recognised as a notoriously difficult area of language and grammar.

1. Introduction

In evolutionary biology and historical linguistics, investigation frequently centres on the extent to which the development of the individual and species, of the speaker and the language, are parallel. In assessing how the category of interjection arose in ancient theories of grammar — slowly and not without a number of false steps — we are forced to recognise how its long and difficult gestation reflects the apparently marginal perhaps even independent (and thus difficult to analyse) position of interjections in the grammar of sentences. The history of the interjection as a category is, in a very real sense, the overall history of parts of speech both as a set and as the individual members of that set, and it is a history already well discussed in the literature (see, for instance, Colombat, 1988 and Lallot, 1988); nonetheless it is instructive to reconsider how the ancients and their successors went about tackling what is even now recognised as a notoriously difficult area of language and grammar. The debate is still open over whether these items even have a place in grammatical structure or analysis, and considering the possibility of these items as forming a group is a central precursor to making any kind of progress in this debate.

2. The Greek Tradition (1): early developments

The history of the analysis of language into so-called ‘parts of speech’ as such (although not the parts of speech familiar to the modern world) begins with Aristotle. But it is in what went before that we must start, because it is in the work of Plato that we find documented the first substantial suggestions that language is analysable, i.e.

can be divided into chunks whose value and combinatorial properties are amenable to systematic description and explanation. This insight seems itself to have arisen out of the earlier work of Heraclitus and Protagoras, who had begun to isolate *units* of language as λόγος ('argument, sentence, connected group of words') and ὄνομα ('name') (Hovdhaugen, 1982: 22). Plato in *The Sophist* and *Cratylus* presents what may be seen as developments of these insights by arguing for what we may call *combinatorial analysis*, i.e. one in which larger units can be made up of combinations of smaller units and thus broken down into them: a sentence consists not only of ὀνόματα but also contains a ῥῆμα ('predicate' or 'verb') (see also Hovdhaugen, 1982: 22; Robins, 1951: 17–18). It is precisely as a result of these two innovations that the seeds of the problem of interjections are sown, for accepting this general approach implies — though it does not in fact require — that items in language can be recognised as units, that they can and will eventually be suitably recognised as members of one of a reasonably small (and definable) set of groups (based on shared characteristics of one description or another), and that a (larger) unit that is divisible (such as a sentence) will be wholly made up of such units (i.e. there will not be some unallocated 'residue' or 'remainder'). The whole subsequent history of the development of the parts of speech reflects in my view a series of attempts to carve up language into units with the aim of these units making up groups that can encompass all the units of the utterance (syntagmatically) and the language (paradigmatically).

Aristotle, in the fourth century BC, built on this new understanding of the structure of language. For our present purposes his crucial relevant contribution was to coin the term 'part' (μέρος) of 'speech' (λέξις) and to establish the number of these at eight (*Poetics* 20; this section of the text is not without problems, see Pinborg, 1975: 72–5). Aristotle's notion of parts of speech differs quite markedly from that of later writers, whose view is basically what survives into the modern world, but it is in many ways extremely sophisticated, in part prefiguring hierarchical structural and componential approaches of the twentieth century. For Aristotle the eight parts of speech do not amount to eight parallel categories, being the classes of which words are members, rather they constitute a series of levels of analysis ranging (in increasing order of size) from the στοιχεῖον ('element', i.e. 'sound') to the λόγος (Willis, 1913). Aristotle thus refined the notion of divisibility and structure, and implicitly emphasised the significance of attempting to be comprehensive and inclusive. It is not, however, for this or even for his particular approach that his work was important to many of those who followed him. His layered approach was not itself directly taken up by subsequent scholars, and we have here an excellent example of how the history of the notion of parts of speech cannot be read as a straightforward narrative in which each stage simply takes up what preceded and offers some refinement or advance. Rather, the unifying thread that runs through the intellectual succession has three strands of a different kind, namely that at each stage scholars are trying to answer the same basic question about language structure; that at each successive stage there is (for a range of reasons) some degree of continuity of terminology; and that throughout there is a largely unquestioned methodological assumption as to the approach to be taken to investigating language structure, which consists in (increasingly exhaustive) division and combination. Aristotle's greatest concrete contribution to the work of subsequent writers appears, in fact, to be the apparently totemic *number* of parts, namely eight.

Stoic philosophers in the Hellenistic period were the next to take forward the analysis of language into parts of speech, working to elaborate categories parallel to ὄνομα and ῥῆμα, the latter ('what is said, predicate') now interpreted in the more

limited sense of its minimal instantiation, i.e. a verb. These categories emerge to encompass other parts of sentences by subdividing the existing categories: to take an obvious example, proper and common nouns came to be separated. It is in this period that two important developments took place. The first is the apparent subdivision of Aristotle's category of 'linking words' (σύνδεσμοι) — basically particles and conjunctions — into σύνδεσμοι (proper) and articles (ἄρθρα) (Robins, 1951: 25–30; 1997: 34–5, 42). In Aristotle the category of ἄρθρον had in fact existed, but it had not applied solely to what would now be thought of as 'articles' or 'determiners' (though the passage in question, *Poetics* 20.7, is deeply obscure, and the precise distinction between ἄρθρον and σύνδεσμος is, uncharacteristically for Aristotle, unclear). Early Stoic accounts, around the start of the third century BC, seem to have recycled the terminology (ἄρθρον literally means 'a joint') with a new value (apparently, inflected connectors). Modern accounts of the history of linguistics are quite ready to present these Stoic developments as direct descent from and refinement of Aristotle's position; I suspect the true nature of the link is rather more subtle. If these later works are taking any account of Aristotle's view — and the (re)use of his technical terminology is some evidence that they do, even if it remains unclear the extent to which his metalinguistic terminology is, strictly speaking, technical — his writing appears to be used more as a source to dip into rather than as a textbook presenting a coherent theory to be built on. The whole sophisticated quasi-hierarchical conception of language structure which characterises Aristotle's work is fundamentally lacking, and the Stoics' approach is instead much more easily seen as the intellectual descendant of Plato. For them, Aristotle chiefly provides new *terms* but not necessarily new ideas, insight or framework, and given their apparently different conception of the category of σύνδεσμοι both in itself and in relation to other categories, it is not clear that they took even this category straightforwardly from Aristotle. The second development of interest in the later part of this period, in the second century BC, is the creation of the category of adverb (μεσότης, 'middleness' i.e. neither noun nor verb) by the later Stoics (Diog. Laert. 7.57), apparently created out of the class of common nouns (προσηγορία; Robins, 1951, 1997). Of this latter development, and indeed of the Stoics' grammar in general, we have at best indirect rather than clearly contemporary evidence (Law, 2003: 40 offers a sober assessment of the problem), and as such the intellectual succession, debts and inheritance remain for the most part obscure.

3. *The Greek Tradition (2): the Τέχνη γραμματική*

Modern assessments of the ancient grammatical tradition agree that the point at which there began to appear works specifically dedicated to considering language and to doing so in a systematic and inclusive manner, marks an important watershed in the development of language study. It symbolises, one might say, a 'coming-of-age' and the start of a move away from discussion arising out of unsystematic and potentially inconsistent native-speaker or 'folk' intuitions about language (or particular instances or aspects of it). It is in a broad sense the point at which linguistics became a 'technical' field, one in which there had developed a body of knowledge and expertise that could be drawn together, mastered and contributed to. At the same time, it would be quite wrong to see this as the death of what might be called 'lay' interest in all areas of language: non- and semi-technical metalinguistic interest and speculation among language-users without any doubt persisted, both in terms of general theories of how language (or aspects of it) can be explained (differences of language between Greeks

and ‘barbarians’, those who go ‘bar-bar’, are mentioned by, for instance, Homer, Herodotus, Strabo and others; cf. Hovdhaugen, 1982: 49–51) and in terms of specific applications of language such as poetics and rhetoric (note Aristotle’s discussion of the parts of speech forms part of his *Poetics*). This latter kind of practical discussion relating to how best to apply language had been and remained important through into the Roman period and beyond particularly in the system of education, and the development for the first time at this stage of what might be called ‘grammars’ occurred alongside this kind of work. From the perspective of one looking at the history of the category of ‘interjection’ this formal development of a more holistic or inclusive approach is doubly important, not only for the reasons just given but also because it marks both a logical development from what preceded (making a fuller attempt to deal with the twin tasks of identifying and categorising parts) and the point at which, once everything else could supposedly be adequately categorised, the question of what to do with these difficult items began to be too significant to ignore.

The text of crucial importance in this period is the grammar of Dionysius Thrax (‘the Thracian’), an Alexandrian scholar of the first century BC. Since at least the mid-third century BC, Alexandria had been a centre for textual scholarship, and from the second century there began to arise out of this what Robins (1951: 37–8) calls ‘a consciousness in the learned Greek community of its literary past, and a realization of the divergence between current spoken Greek and classical literary Greek’. This in itself may have engendered a desire to codify the Greek language not just in a neutrally descriptive manner but in a way that based itself on respected literary usage (as Dionysius himself calls it, τ[ὰ] παρὰ ποιηταῖς τε καὶ συγγραφεῦσιν ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ λεγόμεν[α] ‘what is generally said by poets and prose-writers’) and that offered the means to be treated as prescriptive guidelines; realisation of divergence or change has regularly been a contributory cause to the development of codification in language (e.g. the Carolingian reform of Latin in the ninth century following historical divergence, Wright, 1982; the codification of French in the seventeenth century, Lodge, 1993; etc.). Dionysius’ *Τέχνη γραμματική* cannot have been the only work of its kind, a summary textbook of grammar, but it rapidly became the standard or best-known version of Greek grammar and evidently it formed the basic foundation of most subsequent Greek and Latin grammatical writing (particularly in respect of how to structure the presentation of such work); Dionysius is mentioned by name by Sextus Empiricus, and his outline of his programme is effectively paraphrased by Varro (Robins, 1997: 37). The surviving text of the *Τέχνη* itself is not without its problems: its attribution, construction and authenticity are much discussed (Law, 2003: 56–7 with bibliography; Robins, 1997: 37–9; Hovdhaugen, 1982: 53–5), but the first part of the transmitted text is widely accepted to be genuinely from around 100 BC or at least from the first century BC and thus plausibly attributable to Dionysius (or closely based on his or similar contemporary work); it is within this part of the *Τέχνη* that we find the discussion of parts of speech.

Dionysius’ discussion of the parts of speech sets them out largely in the form that they are familiar in today; interestingly, they now number eight (Aristotle’s number). His parts of speech are as follow: ὄνομα (‘noun’, not only combining proper and common nouns, which were recognised as subdivisions, but also still including adjectives which had not yet been distinguished by any writer), ῥῆμα (‘verb’), μετοχή (‘participle’), ἄρθρον (‘article’), ἀντωνυμία (‘pronoun’), πρόθεσις (‘preposition’), ἐπίρρημα (‘adverb’, an uninflected word placed with the verb but not compounded with it), σύνδεσμος (‘conjunction’). It is the category of adverb, ἐπίρρημα (‘something said in addition’), that encompasses, it seems, what we would

consider to be interjections, including items such as particles of assent, exhortation and exclamation, and this text is, so far as I am aware, the first explicit categorisation of these items. The drive towards being comprehensive coupled with the apparent limit on the number of categories seems to have led to the replacement of the earlier category of *μεσότης* with what can, perhaps uncharitably, be thought of as a ‘fudge’, in other words a ‘catch-all refuge’ category into which a range of items (disparate at least in terms of their semantic value and syntactic function) might be put on the basis apparently of their invariable morphology and the fact that they do not fall into any other category (cf. Haspelmath, 2001: 16539 on ‘particle’, 16543–4 on the general cross-linguistic problem of classifying ‘adverbs’). As members of acknowledged subdivisions within the new adverb category, interjection-type items in this analysis achieve important recognition in respect of the very acknowledgement of their existence and their basic analysis into small groups, but their marginal syntactic status and the fact that they do not form a single distinctive and coherent semantic or morphological class meant that their potential status as a natural (but pragmatically recognisable) class was not sufficiently prominent to justify extending the list of categories, of which all the others were defined semantically and/or morphologically (see also Robins, 1958: 95–6).

The most significant successor to Dionysius in the Greek tradition in general and with regard to interjections in particular, was Apollonius Dyscolus, a second-century AD Alexandrian scholar whose writing on syntax (which mostly survives) effectively forms a conceptual counterpart to Dionysius’ work, which essentially overlooks syntax. It was on his work that the Latin grammarian Priscian later modelled his own treatment of syntax. Apollonius, in following Dionysius, does not directly address the question of isolating and analysing interjections, and his work on the syntax of adverbs is part of his *Syntax* that does not survive. There is, however, one intriguing aside that he records in a discussion (I. 73–9) on the Greek definite article: in it he rejects a view (apparently, in fact, espoused by Dionysius) that $\hat{\omega}$ (the particle of address, ‘O’) is the vocative form of the definite article; unusually for Apollonius, his chief argument against this view is morphological (his typical arguments being syntactic), namely that Greek vocative case-forms have shorter vowels than their nominative counterparts while that of $\hat{\omega}$ is longer than that of $\acute{\omega}$ (the difference in breathing is overlooked). The significance of this discussion is that it demonstrates an awareness of the existence of these items, that they need some account, that their syntax is problematic and does not immediately give a clue to how best to categorise them, and that notwithstanding even Apollonius’ concentration on the relationship between semantics and syntax, the notion of a pragmatically defined major category was as yet not extant. To a large degree it is possible to argue that the approach to interjections that we find in some theoretical accounts of syntax in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century has not significantly advanced (in terms of insight) beyond that of Apollonius, who is at least willing to acknowledge in places the existence of the questions raised by the position of these items at what might now be termed the pragmatics–grammar interface.

4. The Latin Tradition

Alongside this later Greek tradition, we find the beginning of Latin grammatical thought, beginning with Varro in the late second/early first century BC (Hovdhaugen, 1982: 71–83; Law, 2003: 42–9). Varro’s work, though substantial and aware of both

contemporary debate and earlier ideas, stands largely in isolation, not taken up by his successors (Law, 2003: 65, 69) and (with respect, at least, to parts of speech) not perpetuating or developing the earlier tradition. With the advent of writing in Latin on questions of grammar, there did however later come a significant development in the analysis of interjections, even if in other respects the contribution of Roman grammarians (after Varro) ‘showed little inventiveness, but rather adopted the patterns that the Greeks had worked out for the Greek language’ (Robins, 1951: 58). Unlike Greek, Latin had no definite (or indefinite) article — as Quintilian in the later first century AD remarks in a discussion of parts of speech, *noster sermo articulos non desiderat* (‘our language has no need of articles’, *Inst. orat.* 1.4.19). While this is on the face of it a remark on the adequacy of the Latin language, it is in no small part also a remark on the adequacy for Latin of the categorial (i.e. part-of-speech) analysis that was inherited from Greek scholarship (in terms of the particular set of categories inherited, that is): we should perhaps take *articulos* to be in inverted commas, ‘our language has no need of [the term/category] “articles”’, with *sermo* here maybe even meaning ‘discussion [*sc.* of our language]’, *OLD* s.v. 3); we may note that Quintilian concludes the sentence *sed accedit superioribus interiectio* (‘... but to those [listed] above is added “interjection”’). The implication is clear, that the absence of a need for one category is conceptually linked to the presence of another category, in this case the one in which we are interested: the number of categories remains unchanged and the interjection arises as a replacement for the article. (Compare, coincidentally, the later work of Apollonius Dyscolus, discussed above, who rightly rejected any direct connection between article and, in that instance, a particular interjection; the view he rejects is, of course, ascribed to writers from the first century BC and thus before Quintilian.)

Quintilian is arguably our first substantial source for both the term ‘interjection’ (*interiectio*) and the concept as we would recognise it today. However, there are good reasons for believing that these should not be attributed to him as his own original idea. Rather it seems likely that he was presenting a view that he had learned from his teacher, the freedman and grammarian Q. Remmius Palaemon, author of a now lost *Ars grammatica* (probably AD 67–77: Nettleship, 1886; cf. Suet. *de gram.* 23; Juv. *Sat.* 6.452, 7.215). The part of Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria* that offers a synoptic overview of Latin grammar including the list of parts of speech, *Inst. orat.* 1.4–8 (esp. 1.4.18–21: Nettleship, 1886: 206–11), may well be a semi-literary adaptation modelled extremely closely on the work of Palaemon (which may itself in turn have drawn on a number of sources, not least following in footsteps of the organisational approach of works such as the Τέχνη).

Insofar as Palaemon, therefore, provides the starting point for our modern division of the parts of speech, including interjections, it is fortunate that we have some further testimonial evidence regarding how he viewed interjections. In Charisius’ *Ars grammatica* (mid-fourth century AD) we find the following apparent quotation: *Palaemon ita definit: interiectiones sunt quae nihil docibile habent, significant tamen adfectum animi ...* (‘Palaemon defines as follows: interjections are those which have no referential value but rather signify a state of mind’, p. 238 Keil; see also Barwick, 1922: 149). In this we see finally the recognition of what may be regarded as a category that is being defined pragmatically and whose members’ value is not ‘meaning’ in the sense of ‘reference’ or ‘grammatical relation’ but is associated rather with discourse and the speech-act. Such items seem not to combine with other types of item to produce compositional results (in the way that the other types combine with each other), neither as content nor function words (cf. Haspelmath, 2001); accordingly

they cannot straightforwardly form part of the system that is set up by an analysis into parts of speech. By removing them from the set of adverbs and setting them apart in this way, the overall analysis is a good deal stronger, although we may note that this one category is framed in a way that makes it not parallel to the other seven individually but to the other seven collectively (the general degree of consistency in definition across categories is in itself an interesting question; Robins, 1951: 67). This separation is the culmination of centuries of tension between these items being clearly linguistic and recognisable formally as words (in the sense of conventionalised groups of sounds) and yet not having behaviour that is functionally (in terms of meaning) or morphosyntactically like that of other words.

The same basic analysis into eight parts of speech with the *interiectio* indicating an *affectus animi* is to be found in the many other ‘school’ grammars of the late Roman empire, including ultimately the influential work of both Priscian and Donatus, whose grammars were the staple of education throughout the middle ages (on these in general, see Hovdhaugen, 1982: 88–105; also Pinborg, 1985).

5. Conclusion

The history of the development of the parts of speech reflects, I have argued, a series of attempts to carve up language into units with the aim of these units making up groups that can encompass all the units. The fact that interjections do not apparently make up units led to a tension between their self-evident status as words and their status as a group of similar kinds of item; this tension is witnessed in the frequent reconsideration of how they should be analysed. With the Roman tradition and Latin scholarship, the analytical position of interjections was all but fixed for over one and a half millennia.

What is perhaps remarkable in the whole story is that the problem of classification which was presented by interjections (namely: how does the structure of use, e.g. semantics, morphology and syntax as seen in how an item appears in sentences, relate to the structure that should be used for the analysis of language?) is a problem that is conceptually akin to another one which was addressed and attacked (albeit not entirely satisfactorily) earlier in the whole development of the analysis, namely that of the vocative case. The vocative case of both Greek and Latin is prototypically used for direct address, and in both languages it has some distinctive, apparently inflectional, morphology. An item in the vocative case fulfils the formal characteristics of a noun in a case-form and since case is a secondary category that all nouns should have a value for (just as all words should have a value for the category ‘part of speech’), the vocative must logically be a case; but it is case that is not like any other, for unlike the other cases it cannot also be defined by its combinatorial properties (e.g. as subject, object, etc.). The chief property of the vocative case is not, apparently, combining with other items and signifying (even eliciting) discourse *participation* rather than mere reference. Ancient views of the grammar of address are at least as confused as those of far more recent times (for an analysis of a range of such views see Ashdowne, 2007), and the source of the confusion is precisely this definitional clash between formal and functional characteristics. Nonetheless, it is clear that both Stoics and Alexandrians grappled with the question of the vocative and recognised it long before the interjection began to come close to proper recognition (Robins, 1951: 33, 41). Such, however, was the power of tradition — another recurring theme in our narrative — that with the vocative inherited as a full ‘case’ by,

for instance, Priscian, there came the difficulty of considering how then pronouns (even of the second person) might have a full functional and morphological paradigm (e.g. Keil III, 2.9–15, see also Vairel, 1981, 1986; cf. Law, 1995: 109–11, Mussies, 1998).

Finally, then, we may ask why was there this difference in treatment between vocative and interjection. It seems to me to be associated precisely with morphological or paradigmatic productivity. It is plain that almost every noun should be able to give rise to all its possible forms, and even with a more limited criterion, the apparently regular production of vocatives ‘based on’ nouns makes them a large set of forms that cannot be ignored. By contrast the set of interjections, which is surely as fundamental in language use as forms of direct address are, is a much smaller (semi-)closed set comprising some items derivable (synchronically or diachronically) from other parts of speech (‘down, boy!’, ‘hiya!’ < ‘how are you?’) but also those basic noises which seem both irreducible and scarcely even arbitrary (‘sh!’, ‘ow!’; on the distinction between these ‘primary’ interjections and the ‘secondary’ derived ones especially with reference to Latin, see Hofmann, 1985: 103–8). What is an effectively inescapable problem for nouns (and perhaps pronouns) proved a delayable one for parts of speech, and the compromise solution for each was ultimately admission as a class at what may still prove not to be the most appropriate level (something which Aristotle himself might well have recognised in *his* layered approach).

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