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1 Contents

3 Editor's Note (Nicola McLelland)

5 Guest Editor's Introduction: Interjections (David Cram)

ARTICLES

7 Interjections and the Parts of Speech in the Ancient Grammarians (Richard Ashdowne)

17 Interjections and the Language Functions Debate (Els Elffers)

31 Talking About Interjections (Minne de Boer)

45 L'étude des interjections à la lumière de la réception des idées saussuriennes en Russie (Ekaterina Velmezova)

57 The Exceptional Interest of the Interjection (David Cram)

NOTE AND REVIEW

67 On not over-restricting restricted languages (a reaction to J. Léon's article 'From Linguistic Events and Restricted Languages to Registers.') (David Crystal)

68 Michael Losonsky: *Linguistic Turns in Modern Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006. Reviewed by Werner Hüllen†

PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED

72 Books & Pamphlets / Journals / Articles & Reviews (ed. David Cram)

NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

75 Call for Papers: *Germania Remembered 1600-2009* International Symposium, University of Nottingham, November 20-21, 2009

77 Society for the History of Linguistics in the Pacific (SHLP) Inaugural Conference, ANU, 1st August 2008

78 Linguistic documentation and history. Announcement of Project of Investigation

80 The Vivien Law Prize in the History of Linguistic Ideas (deadline September 30, 2008)

81 News of Members

82 Style Sheet for the *Bulletin of the Henry Sweet Society for the History of Linguistic Ideas*

85 Subscription information

The Exceptional Interest of the Interjection

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> Interiectio vocata, quia sermonibus interiecta, id est interposita, affectum commoti animi exprimit, sicut cum dicitur ab exultante *vah*, a dolente *heu*, ab irascente *hem*, a timente *ei*. Quae voces quarumcumque linguarum propriae sunt, nec in aliam linguam facile transferuntur.
> Isidor of Seville *Etymologiae*, lib. 1, cap. xiv.

All languages (as Isidor and others have observed) seem to have interjections. But it is symptomatic that most languages also seem to have formal varieties (e.g. types of writing and public monologue) in which they are either restricted or excluded.[1] Indeed the most salient feature of interjections, by all accounts, is that they are marginal or defective in this and any number of other ways.

This applies at all levels of linguistic structure. Interjections may contain vocal elements which are not part of the standard phonetic inventory: the English *tut-tut* (of disapproval) is made by a repeated alveolar click, even though English is not a click-language. The phonological structure of interjections can be non-standard: interjections may lack a vocalic nucleus, as in the attention-getter *psst!*, and may contain otherwise non-permissible consonant clusters, as in *phwoar!* At the morphological level, interjections are resistant to derivational and inflectional processes: thus French *tiens!*, is used for both singular and plural addressees. As for the oddity of their syntactic behaviour, this is often taken as definitional: they are not ‘in construction’ with other grammatical elements, they are in principle restricted to root clauses, and they can’t be negated. In short, whatever linguistic category is adduced, interjections appear to be non-prototypical or peripheral exemplars of that category.[2]

This peripheral status could lead one to conclude that interjections are of peripheral theoretical interest; but I wish to argue the contrary. Here, as elsewhere, it is the exception which proves the rule. Seeing how exceptional or borderline cases are dealt with is often more revealing about a theoretical model than running through the paradigmatic cases for which it was primarily designed. If the exception proves the rule in this way, interjections are *exceptionally* interesting.

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[1] ‘Although there are a good many linguistic descriptions that fail to mention interjections, it seems likely that all languages do in fact have such a class of words. In the case of extinct languages, interjections may not be attested in the written records because of the generally informal, colloquial character of this word class. In the case of modern languages, the omission of interjections from a linguistic description probably just signifies that the description is incomplete’ (Schachter 1985: 58).

[2] On the linguistic status of the interjection, see Quirk et al (1972: 411-15); Ehlich (1986); Ameka (1992, 2006); Wierzbicka (1992); Goddard (2000: ch. 7); Fries (2002); Jovanović (2004); Balnat & Kaltz (2008), Elffers (2007) and Kaltz (2007). For a bibliographical survey, see Weydt & Ehlers (1987).

The way that interjections have been dealt with in the western grammatical tradition makes as messy a story as one would expect from an intrinsically diffuse and peripheral category. In order to gain some kind of bird's eye view of the subject, I will suggest in what follows that it is useful to distinguish three distinct theoretical perspectives on the interjection, which combine and interact with each other in complex ways, even when one or the other perspective predominates for a particular thinker or for a particular historical period. These three perspectives are to view the interjection: as a (peripheral) part of speech; as a (minor) sentence type; and as a (liminal) unit on the outer boundary of language itself. In a fourth section I will briefly consider the status of the interjection in the current debate about the boundary between semantics and pragmatics, and ask whether current concerns can usefully inform our re-reading of earlier periods in linguistic historiography – and vice-versa.

1. The interjection as a peripheral part of speech

One perspective on the interjection which is deeply anchored in the western grammatical tradition is to see the interjection as word-like, and on this basis to ask what *category* of word interjections belong to. In technical grammatical terms: where does the interjection fit in the framework of the 'parts of speech', and what grammatical criteria can be deployed to distinguish it from other parts of speech?

The problem, however, is that there is no straightforward answer to this question, given the exceptional nature of the set of items under consideration. It is therefore not surprising that a longitudinal history of how the interjection is to be classified, from Greek antiquity to modern times, yields a kaleidoscopic variety of solutions to the problem (and also non-solutions where analysis simply fails). Two studies of the treatment of interjections by Greek and Latin grammarians, Sauciuc (2004) and Ashdowne (2008, this volume), point up just how complicated and varied the treatments were.

The masterly longitudinal history of grammatical categories by Ian Michael summarizes the story: Greek grammarians generally class interjections among the adverbs, following Priscian, on the basis of their (loose) association with verbs; in Latin grammars, however, it is generally treated as a separate part of speech on the grounds that it is strictly independent of the verb and is a self-sufficient expression of emotion; though Varro makes no mention of it, and Quintilian says it must be added to the parts of speech but gives no definition (Michael 1985: 76-81). These views are carried over into the English grammatical tradition, and rehearsed throughout the renaissance and early modern period, with variations treating the interjections both as verbs and as nouns (Michael 1985: 461-65).

It is here important not to lose sight of the wood for the trees. Although there is no consensus in the approaches just outlined, there is nevertheless a high degree of continuity in the question being asked, namely: what sort of word is the interjection and what part of speech does it belong to? This is the form of the question that continues to be asked in textbooks of English grammar well up to the end of the nineteenth century, a grammatical tradition having its origins back in Priscian and Donatus but being more immediately calqued on the Latin grammars authorised for use in English grammar schools in the early modern period. It is a grammatical framework centred on the doctrine of the parts of speech.

The clearest evidence for the underlying continuity of this approach is to look at those cases where grammarians of this sort *fail* to find a solution to the problem of the interjection. Where interjections are seen as exceptional in not fitting neatly into the parts of speech, they are explicitly identified as being exceptional to this specific part of the grammar. They may be material which goes into a grammatical dustbin, but this is not just any old dustbin, but one which is an appendix to the section of the grammar dealing with the parts of speech.[3] In other words, even where interjections do not fit the parts of speech framework, nevertheless here is where they are thought to belong.

2. The Interjection as minor sentence type

A fundamentally different approach to the interjection sees it not as a type of word, but as a type of sentence, albeit a minor and exceptional sentence-type.[4] This is not of course incompatible with the classical definition of the interjection as a unit which is 'interjected' into discourse (and thus, in modern terms, not 'in construction' with other units), and which is a self-sufficient expression of emotion (Michael 1985: 77).

This alternative perspective is one which emerges gradually within the western grammatical tradition, but it is least confusing to start out with a fully-fledged example from the early 20th century and then look backwards to its precursors.

Bloomfield's grammar (of 1933) is classificatory (or taxonomic) in much the same way as traditional part-of-speech grammars had been. It aims to segment grammatical forms into analytic units, and to sort these exhaustively into a set of distributional classes; once this task is done, the grammarian's task is finished. But Bloomfield does not take as his starting point the *word* unit, as in a part-of-speech approach; following a behaviourist methodology he starts out by identifying the *utterance* (an observable act of communication), and uses this as the basis for defining first the sentence unit, and then all other grammatical units in terms of their observable syntactic distribution. This results in the interjection cropping up naturally as a limiting case of a minor sentence type, well before the analysis has proceeded to the more fine-grained distinction of phrase- and word-classes:

> A sentence which does not consist of a favourite sentence-form is a minor sentence. Some forms occur predominantly as minor sentences, entering into few or no constructions other than parataxis; such forms are *interjections*.
> (Bloomfield 1933: 176)

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[3] Alternatively, as in the case of John Earle's grammar of 1866, interjections may be treated in a chapter immediately *before* those dealing with the classification of words into the parts of speech, the ground thus being cleared of material explicitly identified as being relevant to it; see Earle (1866, chapter III 'Of Interjections').

[4] A not dissimilar claim is that in interjections the distinction between word and sentence (or lexeme and utterance), is 'neutralised': Ehlich (1986), Wilkins (1992: 123).

Here, as elsewhere, the interjection reveals itself as being exceptional in some critical sense, for in a distributional grammar, it is distributionally peripheral.[5] But the point to note for present purposes is where the category of interjection belongs in the broad structure of the grammar. In a part-of-speech grammar it is a sort of word; in a distributionalist grammar it is a type of sentence.[6] If the interjection is a theoretical problem, it is a radically different *sort* or problem in these two contrasting frameworks.

Bloomfield's conception of the interjection as a sentence-equivalent is not without its precursors. Ian Michael (1985: 464) traces the view back as far the seveteenth century, claiming that it first appears in the *Essay towards a Real Character* of John Wilkins, who calls interjections 'those Substitutive Particles, which serve to supply the room of some sentence or complex part of it' (Wilkins 1668: 308). However, as we noted above, it can also be argued that such an idea is already implicit in Priscian's conception of the interjection as a self-sufficient expression of emotion (Michael 1985: 77).

Nor should it be thought that the distributionalists were the only scholars who propounded the view of the interjection as a sentence-equivalent. Conclusions of a similar sort were reached, at about the same time but from a very different theoretical starting point, by Karl Bühler. Bühler sees the sphere of meaning in language as deriving from the two dimensions of the 'symbolic' and the 'deictic'; interjections, however, fall under the rubric of neither of these two, but under the special case of 'sympractical', where an isolated word is used as a diacritic for a situation as a whole.[7] Along the same lines, in his *Theory of Speech and Language* (1932), Alan Gardiner had analysed the use of interjections in some detail, drawing a distinction between interjections proper, which he defined as a category of language, and exclamations, which he defined as a category of speech (1932: 318). Indeed functionalist approaches to language and communication will in general be predisposed to view the interjection as a sentence (or utterance) type, and a range of such approaches have been discussed in detail by Els Elffers in a series of articles (see the references in Elffers 2008, this volume). One is also put in mind of the well-known analysis of the utterance '*Ouch!*' at the outset of *Word and Object* (Quine 1960: 4-7).[8]

Once interjections are categorised as a type of utterance unit, it is a natural next step to attempt to analyse and classify them as types of *speech act* (Hofstede 1999). However, although Goddard (2000: 165) observes that many interjections have an affiliation with speech act verbs, it turns out that there is little straightforward mapping between primary interjections and the standard taxonomy of speech act types. Thus Ameka (1992: 110) says that interjections are not ‘fully fledged’ speech acts; and Wierzbicka claims, more radically, that primary interjections have no illocutionary force at all, but rather that they must be seen as ‘vocal gestures’ rather than speech acts (1992: 163). Norrick earlier came to a similar conclusion regarding secondary interjections, such as *Thank goodness!*, which he analyses as a ‘defective’ act of thanking (Norrick 1978: 285). In short, those who have explored the links between interjections and speech acts have regularly arrived at the conclusion that, inasfar as they are speech acts at all, they are defective or incomplete speech acts.[9]

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[5] For other distributional accounts of the interjection as a minor sentence type, see Fries (1952: 52-53); Nida (1960: 216-220); Hall (1964: 217-8).

[6] Bloomfield's approach induces a further distinction between primary and secondary interjections, 'Interjections are either special words, such as *ouch, oh, sh, gosh* ,[...] or else phrases (*secondary interjections*), often of peculiar construction, such as *dear me, goodness me, goodness gracious* [...]' (Bloomfield 1933: 176). On this distinction, see also Nida (1960: 217), Balnat & Kaltz 2008: 142-44).

[7] Bühler (1934: 300; trans. 1990: 341). Elsewhere Bühler comments: 'a significant and well-placed *hm* [...] can often be richer in expressive content, more precise, and less in need of continuation than a much more wordy utterance' (1934: 359; trans. 1990: 410).

[8] ' "Ouch" is a one-word sentence which a man may volunteer from time to time by way of laconic comment on the passing show. The correct occasions of its use are those attended by painful stimulation' (Quine 1960: 4).

3. The interjection as a unit on the margins of language

The third perspective, which contradicts both the previous ones, claims that interjections are marginal in the sense of not being part of language at all.[10] A classic statement of this position is made by Horne Tooke in his *Diversions of Purley*.

> The dominion of speech is erected upon the downfall of interjections. Without the artful contrivances of language, mankind would have had nothing but interjections with which to communicate, orally, any of their feelings. The neighing of a horse, the lowing of a cow, the barking of a dog, the purring of a cat, sneezing, coughing, groaning, shrieking, and every other involuntary convulsion with oral sound, have almost as good a title to be called parts of speech, as interjections have.
> (Tooke 1786: 32)

Two distinct underpinnings for this claim are invoked here, as elsewhere. The first is that the interjection is inarticulate in the same way as animal calls are.[11] The second is that the utterance of an interjection, in its paradigmatic form, is taken to be an involuntary act, in contrast to the conventionalised and arbitrary nature of language proper. Both criteria are echoed by Max Müller a century later, in his *Lectures on the Science of Language*:

> There are no doubt in every language interjections, and some of them may become traditional, and enter into the composition of words. But these interjections are only the outskirts of real language. Language begins where interjections end. There is as much difference between a real word, such as ‘to

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[9] Something similar emerges from Goffman’s analysis of the back-channel markers he calls ‘response cries’; some of these are ‘non-lexicalised, discrete interjections’ which are not fully-fledged words and which do not fully represent conversational encounters, though they may be socially situated (Goffman 1981: 97-99).

[10] For a recent discussion of the liminality of the interjection in this sense, see Trabant (1983).

[11] Those seeking a classical authority for such a view could focus on the term ‘incondita’ in Priscian’s definition of the interjection as ‘pars orationis significans mentis affectum uoce incondita’ (‘a part of speech signifying an emotion by means of an unformed word’) (Padley 1976: 266).

> laugh,' and the interjection, ha, ha! between 'I suffer,' and oh! as there is between the involuntary act and noise of sneezing, and the verb 'to sneeze.'
> (Müller 1861: vol. 1. p.352)

The claim that interjections are not part of language is, paradoxically, associated with theories claiming that human language originated in involuntary cries of an interjectional sort.[12] This argument came to be popularly known as the 'pooh pooh' or interjectional theory of language origin (as distinct from the 'bow wow' or imitative theory, among others).[13] A further paradox is that when linguists subsequently sought to discredit the interjectional theory of the origin of language, it was often precisely on the grounds that interjections are known to be marginal to human language as we know it today. Thus Sapir's argument runs as follows:

> There is no tangible evidence, historical or otherwise, tending to show that the mass of speech elements and speech processes has evolved out of the interjections. These are a very small and functionally insignificant proportion of the vocabulary of language; at no time and in no linguistic province that we have record of do we see a noticeable tendency towards their elaboration into the primary warp and woof of language. They are never more, at best, than a decorative edging to the ample, complex fabric.
> (Sapir 1921: 5)

and finishes with a vivid restatement of the marginality of the interjection. A similar and detailed argument against the interjectional theory of the origin of language is given by Jespersen (1922: 414-15).

More recent arguments for the extra-linguistic nature of the interjection have tended to focus on their structural deficiencies (phonetic, morphological and syntactic; e.g. Strang 1968: 196), or on the functional aspect that they are a paralinguistic accompaniment to language rather than a component part of utterances (Trager 1964; Ameka 1992: 112).

4. The interjection in current linguistic theory

Although the three approaches to the interjection just outlined are logically and philosophically quite independent of each other, a false impression of encapsulated continuity can be produced by a longitudinal thematic perspective on each individually. At any one period, issues arising from all three traditions are likely to be on the agenda, and these will further interact with other theoretical issues currently preoccupying grammarians.[14] This would hold for the view of the interjection held by John Wilkins in the seventeenth century (see above), and it also holds for ideas about the status of the interjection in current linguistic theory, as is amply illustrated by the articles in this volume.

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[12] A parallel paradox arises with proper names, when these are construed as the prototype of lexical reference, and yet deemed not to belong to the lexicon of the language.

[13] On these theories of the origin of language, see Müller (*loc. cit.*) and Sayce (1880: 109-110).

[14] On the importance of local time-horizons and the danger of 'flattened' historical perspectives, see Cram (2007).

There is today no firmer consensus about this category than at any earlier period. What is worthy of note, however, is how the interjection can function as a touchstone or test case for various boundary controversies. I shall briefly note only two of these: the boundary between syntax and pragmatics, and the boundary between semantics and pragmatics.

From a syntactic perspective, what is at issue is what Luigi Rizzi has called 'the fine structure of the left periphery' of the sentence (Rizzi 1997). The interjection, it will be recalled, is essentially restricted to root clauses, where it is typically sentence-initial. But it is not the only sort of unit with similar syntactic restrictions, and there are related ones, including exclamative phrases, vocatives and topic phrases, for which linguists have been attempting to develop syntactic accounts.[15] It is fairly clear that vocatives and exclamatives are closely related to interjections (indeed many traditional grammars would treated both of these straightforwardly as types of 'secondary' interjection), and further that vocatives are closely related to topic markers (Maynard 2001). But it is not as yet clear whether there can be a unified syntactic account of the range of 'left-peripheral' elements with which the interjection is thus associated.[16]

When interjections are considered from a semantic point of view, a rather different clustering of categories emerges. They clearly do not contribute to the truth-functional content of sentences in which they occur. They have strong similarities with deictics (Wilkins 1992), and they share with a larger range of items which are restricted to root clauses (including many deictics) the property of being lost in the translation between direct and indirect speech (Banfield 1973: chapter 1). They are frequently grouped under the larger rubric 'pragmatic marker' or 'discourse marker' on the grounds of their pragmatic function,[17] and for similar reasons are linked with intonation. Thus some of the most common interjections are in fact semantically neutral and pick up their communicative function wholly by virtue of the intonational contour they carry: compare English *uh-hunh?* versus *uh-hunh!* and *oh?* versus *oh!*, etc.[18]

It would not be surprising if the interjection turned out to be a pivotal touchstone in the debate concerning the boundary between semantics and pragmatics. The boundary has most often been characterised in terms of a distinction between what is said and what is implicated.[19] But it may be that a quite different dimension, the communication of expressive context, will cross-cut this debate (cf. Potts 2005:

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[15] See Greenberg (1984), Haegeman (1984), Ashdowne (2002), Zanutti & Portner (2003), Speas 2003, Portner & Zanutti (2005), Hill (2007).

[16] Related work which potentially applies to the analysis of interjections concerns 'sentence fragments' and other minor sentence types, which can either be considered as elliptical (i.e. having underlying semantic content which is unexpressed) or complete in themselves but requiring pragmatic enrichment. For a survey of work in this area, see Stainton (2006).

[17] See Fraser (1990) and Schourup (1999). On the larger question of the part-of-speech analysis of particles, see Hentschel & Weydt (1989).

[18] If interjections are 'radically pragmatic' in this sense, this prompts the empirical prediction that their use will be impaired in people with autism and Asperger syndrome. Enquiries have failed so far to gain any expert information concerning this hypothesis.

[19] For a survey of differing positions on this issue, see Huang (2007: chapter 7).

chapter 5; Wharton 2003) and that the expressive nature of the interjection, which formed part of Priscian's definition of it, will decide the day.

5. Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to tease apart three fundamentally different perspectives on the interjection: as a type of word, as a type of sentence, and as a type of language unit. All three approaches see the category as an exceptional case, but as an exceptional case of a different sort. Although the approaches are theoretically quite distinct, they are not in principle incompatible one with another, and at any one period, and for any one thinker, elements of all three may be simultaneously in play, and indeed usually are. Nevertheless, in the analysis of any one period or any one thinker, it is usually illuminating to reconstruct the underpinning theoretical framework which indicates where the definition of the category of interjection is inherently anchored.

I have argued that the interjection is exceptionally interesting in two senses of the term 'exceptional'. In its own right, it is an example of the marginal or peripheral category *par excellence*: from whatever perspective you view it, or against whatever linguistic category you try to match it, it doesn't quite fit. In a quite different and complementary sense, it serves as a theoretical touchstone for testing the grammatical model within which it is being considered. How marginal categories are treated is very often more revealing about a grammar than the way run-of-the mill categories are handled.

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