Chapter 14
Interjections

Primarily language does not express thoughts or ideas, but feelings and affections (Cassirer, 1944, p. 25).

Chapter Prospectus

Chapter 14, *Interjections*, engages a phenomenon that has been historically a marginal, thoroughly neglected linguistic category. Their independence of ambient sentential syntax makes interjections largely irrelevant to a linguistics deeply immersed in grammar, and their association with spontaneous spoken discourse makes them of little interest to research based on a written language bias. Recent research offers promise that prototypical characteristics of interjections can provide a basis for empirical analyses of their various forms and functions. In particular, the relationship of interjections to other particles, e.g., fillers and HA-HA laughter, must be clarified. Empirical evidence shows that, in their role as expressions of current emotion, interjections have strong links to both medial and conceptual orality rather than to medial and conceptual literacy. Conventional ("tame") and nonconventional ("wild") primary interjections (Rhodes, 1992, p. 222) differ from one another not only in their acceptance as words, but frequently as well in the level of their accordance with the phonological rules of the language in which they are expressed. Frequent themes of secondary interjections (i.e., interjections including at least one lexical item) include the deity and other supernatural entities (e.g., *Oh God*). The chapter ends with an analysis of the similarities and differences between interjections and fillers and a review of our own recent research on interjections in media interviews, reading aloud, and dramatic performances.

Some History

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have not been kind to interjections. There were indeed writings about "natural sounds" (e.g., Winteler, 1892; our translation), "distress calls" (Kluge, 1902; our translation), "babbling words"

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(Oehl, 1933; our translation), and even interjections in classical languages (e.g., Schwyzer, 1924). But we have not found similar materials for this period written in English or about the English language. The first systematic linguistic investigations of primary interjections were, to our knowledge, those of the Swedish researcher Ideforss (1928), followed by those of Tesnière (1936) and Karčevski (1941), both in French. Reisigl (1999) has summarized much of the history of research on both primary and secondary interjections in the languages of continental Europe; his references, however, are limited to research presented in the German language, and his own research has been largely in terms of secondary interjections.

In particular, the period of time since the beginnings of generative grammar and mainstream psycholinguistics has had little room for entities that have no structural relationship to ambient sentential syntax and are to be found primarily in spontaneous spoken discourse rather than in written materials: An *oh* tells us nothing about the syntactic structure of the sentence that follows it; and, even in its written form, it is a simulation of the spoken.

And so, we have looked to the lexicographers for some information about interjections and their history. We may return now to Table 13.1 from Chapter 13 to examine the interjections listed there as entries (+) in *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary* (11th ed., 2003) and as non-entries (–) used colloquially in the United States. Although not a comprehensive listing, the table reflects the long history of interjections in the written tradition of the English language. For example, *ha(h)* is listed as originating before the twelfth century as an expression of surprise, joy, or triumph. All of the entries are, in fact, listed as interjections, and all of them can be considered primary interjections. We have not included secondary interjections (e.g., *boy*, *God*, *man*). One could argue that *gee* and *zounds* might be considered secondary interjections, but the references to Jesus and to Christ's wounds, respectively, are only etymological. The non-entries are not designated as to function. The source of our "function" entry is the internet version (www.Merriam-WebsterCollegiate.com) of *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary* (11th ed., 2003), and the function listed there is "interjection" for all of them.

What does it mean to say that the function of these words is to be an interjection? It appears to refer to the fact that they are indeed interjected – tossed or thrown into an utterance – without being integrated in any way with the ambient sentential syntax. But this is at best a function by collocation only. And in fact, this independence of ambient syntax appears not to be a linguistic universal, insofar as at least Chinese interjections can be related to adjacent syntax (see Yang, 2004). But for what purposes are interjections used? This is the real question regarding the function of interjections and what this chapter is all about.

Table 13.1 is also part of the modern landscape of interjections. We have already noted in Chapter 13 that seven of the interjections listed in the table were added during the twentieth century, in fact, as recently as 1971 in the case of *uh-oh*. What is to be said of the non-entries still waiting in the wings to be called out upon the

stage as interjections? In some respects, they literally set the stage for the understanding of the entered items insofar as the rationale for their non-entry offers us clues as to what is required for a word to be acknowledged by the lexicographers as an interjection. It seems clear that there are several reasons for their exclusion from the world of interjections: (1) They have not been found by the lexicographers in written materials (e.g., *piyu*; also spelled as *phew* and as *P-U* [Berdy, 2003]); (2) their orthography is not acknowledged as conventional by the lexicographers (e.g., *huh-uh*), even though they do occur in written materials; or (3) they are considered to be fillers and are therefore arbitrarily excluded from the systematized written language by the lexicographers (e.g., *uh*), again even though they do occur in written materials (see *Example 13.1* in our Chapter 13).

The first instance above (1) involves a non-entry (*piyu*) for which there is no conventional spelling at all. Nonetheless, native speakers of American English will generally recognize our somewhat arbitrary spelling of *piyu* as a reasonable representation of a common oral expression in reaction to an exceedingly offensive odor. The second instance (2) has been mentioned already in Chapter 13 as perhaps the more frequent form relative to *uh-uh,* as an expression of negation. The non-acknowledged form represents an initial *h* sound. Chafe (2007, p. 20) has noted a similar sound in HA-HA laughter, and indeed a sound "responsible for the idea that laughs can be written 'ha ha ha'." The form *uh-uh*, listed as an entry, expresses an initial glottal stop. As for the third instance (3), we have already discussed in Chapter 13 the fact that *uh* is far more frequent than *um*, but is nonetheless not acknowledged by all lexicographers as a legitimate interjection, whereas *um* is acknowledged as such – and precisely as an interjection, not as a filler. Hence, frequency of occurrence in *spoken* English is for the lexicographers by no means an adequate criterion for considering these items as words.

Interjections in Modern Language Sciences

Less than two decades ago, the mention of interjections as a focal research category in any of the language sciences would have been ludicrous. Interjections were literally one of "the ragbag categories" (Harris, 1980, p. 20) for European grammarians. They have been a thoroughly "unpopular subject in linguistics" (Ehlich, 1986, p. 1; our translation). And according to Burckhardt (1998, p. 492; our translation), interjections have suffered a "shadowy existence in the grammars of the twentieth century," and that despite a turn in the 1970s toward a more pragmatic approach in linguistics. Hansen's (1998, p. 41) diagnosis has been summed up by O'Connell, Kowal, and King (2007, p. 2) as follows:

> The neglect of interjections in modern linguistics can be related to its written language bias as well as to its focus on the referential function of language, a focus which is in itself not inclusive of the emotional aspects of language use and therefore not inclusive of interjections.

What little research did exist before the twenty-first century has proceeded from a linguistic standpoint (e.g., Fries, 1988, 1990, 1992). A special issue of the *Journal of Pragmatics* edited by Ameka (1992a) and a special issue of the *Zeitschrift für Semiotik* edited by Kowal and O'Connell (2004a) have now begun to focus attention on the pragmatic and the psychological functions of interjections, respectively.

But before the advent of the generative era of linguistics in mid-twentieth century, there was an earlier psychological interest in interjections. Wundt (1900/1911) himself distinguished the categories of primary and secondary interjections and acknowledged onomatopoeic interjections, although he did not include the division of primary interjections (introduced only much later by Rhodes, 1992, p. 222) into conventional ("tame"; e.g., *oh*) and nonconventional ("wild"; e.g., *piyu*). Nübling's (2004, p. 17; our translation) recent emphasis on "emotionality and expressiveness" as the basic criteria in the determination of "ideal types of interjections" had already been anticipated by Jespersen (1922, p. 415): "The usual interjections are abrupt expressions for sudden sensations and emotions." Karčevski (1941, p. 62 f.; see also Eastman, 1992; Müller & Posner, 2004) has emphasized the involvement of the whole human body in expressive spontaneous spoken discourse. Hence, interjections have also been related to gestures, and gestures or other nonverbal expressions can substitute for interjections (Ameka, 1994, p. 1712). Apart from several German-language studies (e.g., Schneider, 1959; Burger, 1980; Kleemann, 1980), the empirical investigation of these phenomena has not been engaged, to our knowledge, until the last several years.

According to Nübling (2004, p. 11), "interjections are often considered a dumping ground for particles which are otherwise difficult to classify." On the basis of a variety of functional, pragmatic, and formal characteristics, she has posited an "interjectional spectrum" of particles, with primary interjections at the "prototypical center"; this spectrum excludes the two extremes of discourse markers and baby talk. In this taxonomy, the onomatopoetic is relegated to a separate word class on the basis of functional criteria (Nübling, 2005, p. 606). In an earlier publication, Nübling (2001, p. 20) has investigated the diachronic development of interjections, and in particular, the development of secondary interjections into prototypical primary interjections. The title of her article is a German-language example of this interjectionalization: "Von *oh mein Jesus!* zu *oje!*" ("From *oh my Jesus!* to *gee!*"; our translation).

Recent Empirical Research

Kowal and O'Connell (2004b) began their empirical research on interjections with an investigation of a German-language interview of Katarina Witt by Günter Gaus in his TV series *Zur Person*. We chose that interview quite deliberately after looking in vain for interjections in political interviews. What

we had found was that politicians are generally cautious for the sake of their constituency: They wish to say the right thing, and such a stance hardly encourages the spontaneous expression of emotion. The result is a general paucity of interjections in political TV interviews. For example, throughout seven of Gaus's political TV interviews (with the German politicians Adenauer, Kohl, Schily, Scharping, Schröder, Schäuble, and Vollmer), lasting a total of five and a half hours, only 15 interjections occurred overall. By contrast, Katarina Witt, a world renowned ice skater turned movie actress – certainly not a politician – in her interview of only 45 min, uttered 59 interjections, while her interviewer uttered only two. The imbalance of $59 > 2$ interjections on the part of the interviewee pinpoints the relative conceptual orality of the interviewee's role in relation to the more conceptually literate role of the interviewer. In more concrete terms, while Katarina Witt expressed herself with considerable emotion in an unconstrained manner, her interviewer continued to pose carefully formulated questions in a very serious, objective manner. Her most frequently used interjections were the primary tame interjection *na ja* and the primary wild interjection *pff*, whereas she used only one secondary interjection, *Mensch*. Meanwhile, Gaus made use of only two back-channeled instances of *m-hm*.

Witt's interjections provided an abundant database with which to test a number of hypotheses with respect to privileges of occurrence. For this purpose, Kowal and O'Connell (2004b, p. 85) have examined locations where interjections occurred as well as the durations of pauses preceding and following them:

> (1) *ÄH* belongs to the word class of interjections (Ehlich, 1986); (2) since interjections are not syntactically embedded, their production always involves isolation by preceding and following pauses from accompanying oral utterances (Ameka, 1992b, 1994); (3) the sentence substitutes *ja* and *nein* are functionally interjections when emotionally laden, and in this setting deviate in their phonetic realization from standard forms (Tesnière, 1936).

(1) As it turned out, Ehlich's hypothesis that the German filler *äh* is to be considered an interjection was not supported in the data. The *äh* was not used in the same locations as interjections or with the same pattern and duration of pauses before and after it as interjections. Since its privileges of occurrence did not match those of interjections, the filler could not be considered an interjection. In this respect, our findings are in accord with Nübling's (2004, p. 16) exclusion of *äh* as an interjection and with those of our investigation of the English-language fillers *uh* and *um* (O'Connell & Kowal, 2005b, as reported in our Chapter 13; but see Rasoloson, 1994, for the opposite position). (2) Nor did Ameka's (1992b, 1994) hypothesis that temporal isolation – the occurrence of pauses both before and after interjections – will parallel their syntactic isolation receive support in our data: Less than 20% of the interjections were thus isolated, and more than twice as many (43%) were instead embedded, i.e., with no pause before or after them – the complete opposite of isolation. (3) The third hypothesis could not be tested for *ja*; there were no cases in which its phonetic realization was not standard. For *nein*, however, 25 of 26 occurrences

deviated from standard phonetic realization (mostly as *nee*), and so the hypothesis could be tested: The mean duration of pauses before and after it was much shorter than for interjections (0.96 < 1.51 s). Hence, there was no evidence for considering *nee* as an interjection in this case.

At present, we are continuing our investigation of *yes* and *ja* in the original English and in the translated German versions of audio recordings of Molly Bloom's soliloquy in the last chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922/1960). The evidence indicates quite overwhelmingly that it is not a phonological deviation from the standard form of *yes* or *ja*, but the duration and other prosodic characteristics of these items that manifest their shift into interjections, *if and when* they are used for emotional expression – or for what has in this setting been referred to as "a very feminine 'yes' " (Lenoski, 2001, p. 8) – rather than for simple affirmation. Using the case of the affirmative particle *ja* as it shifts into an interjection, Nübling (2001, p. 28 f.) has provided a charming example of a gradual interjectionalization of *ja*, taken from a printed advertisement of a man shaving while trying to terminate a phone call with his mother: "Ja Mutter! – Jaa Mutter! – Jaaa Mutter! – Jaaaa Mutter! – Jaah Mutter! – Jaaahaa. . ."

What we did find from the Katarina Witt interjections, was not only that they reflected her penchant for emotional expression, but that they also served primarily the function of initializing speaking turns and turns of reported discourse, i.e., utterances explicitly designated as quotations. This finding confirms the claim of Reisigl (1999, p. 27) that the location of interjections to initiate, continue, or conclude an utterance is instructive for their functional analysis. At the beginning of turns, Witt's interjections were typically (i.e., 65% of the time) preceded by a pause. This finding suggested that interjections should be understood more as being interposed dialogically at locations between turns rather than within turns.

In order to pursue the matters of emotional expressiveness and initialization further, a dramatic corpus of interjections was sought out. And since George Bernard Shaw's (1916/1969) *Pygmalion* makes Eliza Doolittle's use of a single interjection crucial to his very emotional narrative, O'Connell and Kowal (2005c) have made use of it to compare the written interjections of the play with the spoken interjections of the motion picture *Pygmalion* (Pascal, Asquith, & Howard, 1938) based on the play. They found that the actors spoke unchanged only 30% (57/187) of the interjections in the written text of the play. Moreover, the actors substituted 29 other interjections for the written ones. But what was truly astounding was the finding that the actors added fully 106 interjections on their own initiative in other locations. These substitutions and additions have strongly indicated that, in Goffman's (1981, p. 226) terms, the actors were participating in the role of *author* and transcending the role of *animators* to become *principals*, parties "to whose position, stand, and belief the words attest." Most of the wild or nonconventional primary interjections that were spoken (21/24) were added spontaneously by the actors. Shaw's (1916/1969, p. 11) own use of a seven-syllable written wild interjection as Eliza's signature utterance – "ah-ah-ah-ow-ow-ow-oo" – is both hyperbole and

caricature. The actors in the roles of Eliza and Professor Higgins reduced the corpus of 20 of these signature interjections from an average of 5.1 syl in the written source to an average of 1.3 syl, i.e., generally to a single core vowel. In other words, they defied the written text with its caricature of interjections and instead employed realistic interjections as expressions of their own emotions – an act of authorship. This finding is in accord with Nübling's (2004, p. 24) generalization that spoken interjections are typically short, even monosyllabic. The data have also confirmed the findings of O'Connell and Kowal (2005c) that interjections are used primarily to express emotional involvement and that they fulfill an initializing function: 56% of the spoken interjections in the motion picture version were in initializing positions, compared with only 8% in final positions.

O'Connell et al. (2004, p. 185) have pursued the notion of relative conceptual orality on the part of an interviewee vs. a relative conceptual literacy on the part of an interviewer. As expected of politicians and their interviewers, there were not many interjections: Throughout eight interviews, a total of only 35 were found. Of these, 88% were produced by the interviewees, confirming the conceptual orality found in Katarina Witt's interview. The fact that 71% of the interjections occurred either at the beginning of a turn or before reported speech confirms our hypothesis regarding the initializing function of interjections. In addition, of the 35 interjections, 86% were produced by women. The most frequently used interjection in English was the primary interjection *oh* or the secondary interjection *oh yes*. In German, the most frequently used interjection was *na* or *na ja*, a result that has confirmed the finding for Katarina Witt.

O'Connell, Kowal, and Ageneau (2005) have continued the use of media interviews with a set of six interviews given by Hillary Clinton and a single interview given by the actor Robin Williams. The hypothesis of Ameka (1992b, 1994) that syntactic isolation of interjections would be paralleled by articulatory isolation, i.e., by the presence of pauses both before and after interjections, was once again found to be without evidence: The average percentages of articulatorily isolated interjections in the set of Hillary Clinton interviews and in the single interview of Robin Williams were only 12% and 19%, respectively – hardly characteristic of interjections in general in the corpus. Again, interviewers displayed characteristic conceptual literacy insofar as Hillary Clinton's interviewers used an average of fewer than three interjections per interview compared to Hillary Clinton's 34 interjections, and Lipton used only 11 interjections in his interview with Williams, who used a total of 128 interjections – especially of the nonconventional or wild primary type. Once again, this result has confirmed that actors are more emotionally expressive than politicians. Nonetheless, both Hillary Clinton and Robin Williams as well as all their interviewers used the primary tame interjection *oh* most frequently. The initializing function of interjections was also confirmed: For the same sets of data, the overall percentages of interjections used initially, i.e., "at the onset of various units of spoken discourse," were 71% and 73%, respectively. This finding in turn confirms the generalization of Bres (1995, p. 85 ff.) regarding a

much broader initializing function of interjections in the articulatory realization of a speaker's intentions. According to Bres, an interjection is more immediately accessible at the first moment of articulation than are other verbal units; it occurs rapidly and may lead directly into the realization of a longer phrase. On the other hand, an interjection may stand alone as a sentence substitutable unit, as linguists have long recognized. Nübling (2004, p. 30; our translation) has referred to this characteristic of interjections as "syntactic autonomy and holophrasis." Our own data exemplify both the initialization and the syntactic autonomy. For example, the secondary interjection *Oh God* was clearly used as a sentence substitutable complete turn (O'Connell et al., 2005, p. 169). It is important to note that sentence substitutability is definitely not characteristic of fillers (see our Chapter 13).

In their summary, O'Connell et al. (p. 153) have sought to generalize regarding the use of interjections:

> *The onset or initializing role of interjections reflects the temporal priority of the affective and the intuitive over the analytic, grammatical, and cognitive in speech production. Both this temporal priority and the spontaneous and emotional use of interjections are consonant with Wundt's (1900) characterization of the primary interjection as psychologically primitive. The interjection is indeed the purest verbal implementation of conceptual orality.*

We would add too that wild or nonconventional primary interjections are particularly salient in their affective expressiveness.

O'Connell et al. (2007) have recently compared oral literary readings with artistic performances of actors with regard to their use of interjections in English. They have found the addition of spoken interjections that did not occur in the written text far more extensive in the acting performances than in the readings: 79% > 26%. Again, in Goffman's (1981, p. 226) terms, literary readers are for the most part only *animators,* whereas performing actors are mostly *principals*. As has been the case in our previous research, O'Connell et al. (2007) have found that Ameka's (1992b, 1994) hypothesis regarding the isolation of interjections by preceding and following pauses could not be confirmed; only 39% of all interjections were thus isolated. But the initializing role of interjections could indeed be confirmed: 77% of all interjections were initializing in this corpus of 667 spoken interjections. The primary tame interjections *oh* and *ah* were the only interjections common to all the corpora.

Interjections are also used in a number of other settings. Some instances of what Karl Bühler (1990, p. 176) has referred to as "*empractical* naming and pointing using isolated language signs" are interjections. The murmuring and mumbling that occur as individuals watch TV drama or a sporting event consist partly of interjections (see Baldauf, 2002). And many of the expressions of live audiences by way of approbation and affiliation on the one hand and disapprobation and disaffiliation on the other are also interjections (see our Chapter 18). For example, *hurrah*, *bravo*, *boo*, *"Hear! Hear!*," (*Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*,

11th ed., 2003, p. 574), and many other orthographically and phonetically wild, nonconventional utterances proper to such settings are interjections.

In summary, the empirical research clearly indicates that the use of interjections is both psychologically and socio-culturally relevant as well as constituting an orderly phenomenon worthy of further investigation.