

# The Language of Interjections

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**Abstract.** The paper presents a theoretical view of interjections. It defines them as holophrastic codified signals, whose meaning corresponds to complete speech acts including a specific performative and propositional content. Interjections are then distinguished from exclamations and onomatopoeias, and some devices are analyzed that characterize them. An overview of the syntactic, lexical and semantic features of interjections is provided, and a typology of Italian interjections is presented.

**Keywords:** interjections, onomatopoeia, exclamation, holophrastic language, emotional language.

## 1 Introduction

A quite distinctive feature of speech as opposed to written language is the presence in it of interjections: a kind of utterances with a peculiar acoustic structure, generally considered a typical case of emotional language.

In the last decade, research on speech has allowed us to widen and deepen our knowledge concerning the vocal expression of emotions and the prosodic, intonational and acoustic features of face to face interaction. Many of these findings will be certainly of use in gaining new knowledge about interjections. But to make sense of possible findings about their phonetic and acoustic structure, a general view of their communicative structure and function may help. In this work I present a theoretical perspective about interjections, their nature and status as a communicative system, and a taxonomy of the meanings they convey.

## 2 A Neglected Part of Speech

Interjection in Traditional Grammar is classified as the ninth part of discourse. Its name, from latin *inter iecto*, (= I throw in the middle) means that it is inserted in the middle of a sentence or discourse. Examples of interjections are *oh, wow, my God!*. In modern Linguistics, interjections have been studied by [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8], [9]. While in Traditional Grammar they are often put together with onomatopoeia and exclamation, in recent Pragmatics they are generally dealt with in connection with hesitations, particles and backchannel signals. Yet, not all interjections are onomatopoeic,

while as to exclamations, also entire sentences can be called so; moreover, not all interjections are hesitations, nor are they all used as such; again, many other kinds of particles exist beside interjections proper; and finally, interjections are not used only for backchannel, nor does backchannel necessarily exploit interjections. A clear definition of the category of interjections is thus lacking.

### 3 Interjections: A Definition

As acknowledged by various scholars [7], [8], an interjection constitutes an utterance by itself. This means that, in terms of [6], [10], [11], an interjection can be defined as a *holophrastic signal*, in that it conveys the information of a whole sentence (*holophrasis* = entire sentence). In fact, if we want to provide a synonym of it, what is equivalent to an interjection is not a single word, but a whole speech act, that is, a communicative act including the meaning of both a performative and a propositional content. Indeed, more than a synonym, a paraphrase.

For example, “*Ouch!*” can be paraphrased as “I am feeling pain”. This speech act has a performative of information, and the information provided concerns the Speaker feeling some unpleasant physical sensation. “*Hey!*” can be paraphrased as “I ask you to pay attention”: it is a requestive speech act, and the action requested is for the Hearer to pay attention to the Speaker and / or the context.

Thus, my definition of interjection is the following: an interjection is a **codified signal** [11], that is, a perceivable signal – a sound sequence in the speech modality, and a sequence of graphemes in the written modality – which is linked in a stable way, in the minds of the speakers of a language, to the meaning of a speech act, that is, to information including both a performative and a propositional content.

In this **speech act**, the propositional content concerns either some mental state that is presently occurring in the Speaker’s mind, or an action requested from the Hearer or a third entity; and the performative is the type of communicative action the Speaker is performing towards the Hearer, his/her goal of informing, asking about, requesting or wishing what is mentioned by the propositional content.

An interjection is a codified signal in that the signal – meaning link is stored in a permanent way in the long term memory of Speakers [11]: not only is so for the propositional content, but also for the specific performative, which is then “incorporated” in the interjection, that is, it makes an integral part of the interjection’s meaning.

### 4 Interjections and Elliptical Sentences

The definition provided allows us to distinguish an interjection from an elliptical sentence. Both convey a whole speech act, but while an elliptical sentence conveys a different speech act in every different context, an interjection always conveys one and the same speech act, just because it is a codified signal – meaning pair permanently represented in the Speaker’s lexicon.

Very often, in everyday conversation, speakers use a single word to convey the meaning of a whole sentence. Take this case:

- (1) A gets into a pub and the barman asks him: “*What do you want?*”  
B answers: “*Beer.*”

In this case B’s single word works as a complete sentence like

- (2) “*I ask you to pour me beer*”:

A speech act with a performative of request and a propositional content concerning the Addressee pouring beer to the Speaker.

But suppose the following:

- (3) B is walking with his friend A, and while passing along the walls of a big old factory, A asks B: “*What did they produce in this factory?*”  
B answers: “*Beer.*”.

In this case B’s single word still conveys the meaning of a whole sentence, but one that can be paraphrased as

- (4) “*In this factory they used to produce beer*”;

This speech act conveys a performative of information and a propositional content concerning people that produce beer.

Here is, therefore, the difference between a single word used as an elliptical sentence and an interjection. In the interjection, the meaning of the whole speech act is codified – permanently stored in memory – while in the elliptical sentence the word uttered only conveys a part of a speech act, either a predicate or an argument of the logical structure of the propositional content, or in some cases only the performative, but not the whole speech act; and the remaining parts of the speech act are to be retrieved from context. For instance, in (3) the non-mentioned parts of the speech act – that beer is what was produced by the factory, and that B’s performative is one of information and not one of request – can only be understood from context: A must fill in the gaps of B’s elliptical speech act, while only a part of it – what was produced – is explicitly meant by B’s word. In this way, however, the complete speech act conveyed is different from time to time.

This is also the case in the so-called “holophrastic” stage in a child’s language development. As a child says “*Ball*” to mean “Give me the ball”, he is using a single word to mean a whole sentence. But the sentence meant is not always the same: in a different context he may simply mean “Look at the ball”. Strictly speaking, this is an elliptical sentence too. But take this case instead:

- (5) Student A is talking to student C during class, and Teacher B summons him by “*Hey!*”.

Here, that B is asking A to pay attention is all conveyed by B’s single “word” “*Hey!*”; and it is so on a codified basis.

To sum up, an interjection is a particular type of “word”: a **holophrastic** word, a “sentence-word”. It is the only case, within a verbal language, in which a single sound sequence conveys, as its meaning codified in the lexicon, a whole speech act all by

itself. In all other cases – for all other grammatical categories: nouns, verbs, adjectives, prepositions... – a single sound sequence only bears a part of the whole speech act, either a predicate or an argument of the logical structure of the propositional content or of the performative, but not all of it. So we can say that all those types of signals – nouns, verbs and so on – are “articulated” signals, in that they convey only a part of a sentence (an “*articulum*”, a “little limb” of it, as Saussure [12] would have put it), while the interjection conveys the whole sentence.

Actually, we can distinguish between holophrastic and articulated signals in various communication systems: for example, among gestures. The gesture *with palm down and fingers bending down* that means “come here” is holophrastic in that it conveys not only the propositional content of the Addressee coming to the Sender, but also a performative of request [11]. On the other side, an articulated gesture is *the hand with palm to Sender and index and middle finger in V shape moving back and forth in front of the mouth*, which can mean “smoke”, or “cigarette”, or “do you have a cigarette?” or “he is a smoker”; it conveys either a question or an information depending on the context and on the facial expression performed along with the gesture. So, this gesture just works as the word “*beer*” in the example above since, different from the gesture for “come here”, it does not convey a whole propositional content nor does it incorporate a specific performative in its codified meaning.

In conclusion, interjections are the only codified holophrastic signals within a verbal language.

## 5 A Deictic Signal

As pointed by [7], an interjection can be also seen as a *deictic signal*, if we define as deictic every signal that, in order to be thoroughly understood, requires you to take contextual information into account. Actually, if we look at (5) above, also in the interjection a small part of its meaning is not codified but must be retrieved from context. If we say that “*Hey!*” means “I (the Speaker) want you (the Interlocutor) to pay attention to something”, to understand who is asked to pay attention, and what he should pay attention to, one has to be present in the same spatial-temporal context in which the interjection is uttered. If we say that “*Wow!*” means “This event causes me (the Speaker) to be pleasantly surprised/amazed”, to understand each particular occurrence of “*Wow!*” one should know what is the specific surprising event. In other words, the piece of information to be retrieved from context in an interjection – that we may call its “reference element” – is, for the interjections mentioning a mental state of the Speaker, the event that causes that mental state, while for those requesting some action it can be the point or the object of the action requested.

## 6 Syntactic Aspects of Interjections

From the definition of an interjection as a single signal that conveys the meaning of a whole communicative act, it follows the syntactic property that gave birth to its name: the fact that it can be “thrown into” the sentence: that it can in principle occur in any of its phrases, even within a phrase, because it is not syntactically linked to any phrase in the sentence [10].

Thus, the interjection is subject to very peculiar syntactic rules. First, different from all other parts of discourse it can stay alone. A greeting, like “*hello!*”, or an acknowledgment of memory retrieval, like “*oh!*”, can occur in the total absence of linguistic context. Second, an interjection does not entertain syntactic relations with other words in a sentence: it can be inserted in various positions in a sentence, even within a phrase, for instance between article and noun in a noun phrase, like in (6).

(6) *I am the... mhm ... girl friend of your cousin.*

Notwithstanding this, we cannot say that interjections are completely out of the scope of syntactic rules. Actually, their position with respect to a sentence is not completely free: their being uttered at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of a sentence, or finally as completely detached from the sentence itself, is determined by their meaning. For example, the Italian interjection “*toh*”, when it means “what I am telling you is trivial” can only be uttered at the end of the sentence

(7) *Chi vuoi che sia al telefono. E' Giovanni, tòh!*  
(Who do you think is calling on the phone? It's Giovanni, wow!)

On the contrary, some interjections expressing surprise or acknowledgment of a belief just assumed generally precede the sentence containing their “reference element”.

(8) *Wow, you repainted your shutters!*

And finally, those expressing doubt or hesitation are preferably uttered in the middle of the sentence, like in (6), and they are not acceptable at the end of the sentence.

## 7 The Lexical Structure of Interjections

If every interjection is a codified signal – meaning pair, a whole list of interjections form a lexicon: a subpart of our mental lexicon, differing from other words only because they are holophrastic words. So let us now see how interjections might be represented in our mental lexicon.

Ever since [13], various scholars have distinguished primary vs. secondary interjections. Primary interjections, like *Oh!*, *Uh!*, are close to natural cries, to instinctive vocalization or, in terms of [14], [15], to affect bursts. Secondary interjections, instead, like “*God!*”, or “*well*” are simply words of a language that are used as holophrastic utterances. Primary interjections have a phonological structure that is hardly similar to that of the language they belong to, even if there is always some kind of “normalisation” that makes them homologous to its phonological system. Secondary interjections, instead, by definition maintain the phonological structure of the language they make part of, since they are, in a certain sense, “canonical” non-holophrastic words.

Yet, if you think of interjections as items in a lexicon – possibly to be simulated in an Artificial Agent – it is useful to distinguish them into “univocal” vs. “plurivocal” interjections [6]. An “univocal” interjection is a sound sequence that only has (one or more)

holophrastic meanings; while a “plurivocal” interjection is a sound sequence that has two or more different meanings, with at least one of them holophrastic. In this sense, a plurivocal interjection is a case of polysemic word: a word with two or more meanings.

Thus, not only *ouch* but also *caramba* are “univocal” interjections, because they both only have a meaning as an interjection. Instead, *Jesus* is “plurivocal” in that it is both an interjection and a noun.

Often, as for all polysemic items [11], between the two or more meanings of a plurivocal interjection it is possible to find out a semantic connection, because generally the meaning as an interjection derives from the meaning as a non-holophrastic word. Take for example the plurivocal interjection *già* in Italian. *Già* is an adverb (corresponding to “already”) in this sentence

- (9) B: *Maria si è già svegliata*  
(Maria has *already* waken up)

But in the following case, it is an interjection.

- (10) A: *Ricordati che devi chiamare Maria*  
(Remember you have to call Maria).  
B: *Già.*  
(Uh uh)

In this case, *già* in its meaning as an interjection means that I am presently remembering something; I did not have this in mind at the moment, but now you remind me of it, I remember that I did know it. Thus, there is in fact something in common between the meaning of *già* as an adverb and that of *già* as an interjection. The adverb means that a certain event has occurred (also) before the moment in which the Speaker is speaking. But also in the holophrastic *già* a certain event has occurred before a given time: this event is the presence, in the Speaker’s mind, of some belief (B’s having to call Maria).

- (11) *Già*: meaning as an adverb

C0: Speaker B speaks  
C1: Maria woke up  
C2: C1 **occurred before C0**

- (12) *Già*: meaning as an interjection

C0: Speaker B speaks  
C1: B believes C2  
C2: B has to call Maria  
C3: C1 **occurred before C0**

Plausibly, *già* as an interjection might derive from *già* as an adverb, by a mechanism through which a whole sentence that contains the adverb, and occurs often in dialogue, gets condensed into a single word. A sentence like

- (13) *Questa cosa la sapevo già (ma al momento non ci pensavo)*  
(This is something that I already knew (but I wasn't thinking of it now)).

This sort of “condensation” might be a general device for the evolution of plurivocal interjections starting from non-holophrastic words.

## 8 Semantics of Interjections

Let us now see what are the meanings that interjections convey, by leaning on a previous analysis of Italian interjections [6], [10]. Since the meaning of an interjection contains a performative and a propositional content, it is possible to distinguish them, according to their performative, into four classes:

- INFORMATIVE, like *ah* (this belief is new to me, and I am coming to believe it) and *uffa* (I am tired / bored), whose goal is to let the Hearer know the mental state occurring in the Speaker;
- INTERROGATIVE, like *eh?* (what did you say?) or *beh?* (why is this so?), that ask the Hearer to provide a belief to the Speaker;
- REQUESTIVE, like *ehi* (please, pay attention to me) or *via!* (go!) to ask the Hearer to perform an action; and
- OPTATIVE, like politeness formulas (e.g. *buonanotte* = *goodnight*) or imprecations (*Dio!*, *mamma!*), that ask a third entity (the fate, a deity) to have something happen.

What are the meanings of interjections? Traditional grammar, but also research in the twentieth century, have always viewed them as a kind of emotional language. But this is not always so. First, there is a difference between the interjections of the first class above, those with a performative of information, and those of other classes. In general, informative interjections make part of the class of “Mind Markers” [11]: those signals that convey Information on the Speaker’s Mind: beliefs, goals and emotions. Actually, also in this class, it is not only emotions that are conveyed by interjections, but more generally mental states. Yet, if we examine the contents conveyed by the other classes of interjections, mainly requestive but also interrogative and optative ones, we can see that they often refer to mental states, actions, or events concerning not so much the Speaker, but the Hearer.

To provide a general view of their meanings, I present a typology of Italian interjections (Tables 1 – 4).

Among informative interjections (Table 1), some inform about the Speaker’s cognitive state, namely about the relations between incoming and previously assumed beliefs, while others inform about the current state of the Speaker’s goals, whether they are fulfilled or thwarted.

Let us start from the interjections about the Speaker’s beliefs. *Ah* (= *oh*) informs that the incoming belief is new for the Speaker, and she is coming to assume it right now; *già* (literally, = already) tells that the belief has already been assumed, or at least it was potentially available (for example, it could have been drawn through inference) in the Speaker’s mind.

Various interjections confirm an incoming belief, by telling that the Speaker already knew it from another source: *davvero* (= indeed), *eh* (= yes, just so), *òh* (= just so, and more than that!), *okay*, *sì* (= yes), *altro che!* (= definitely yes).

*No* and *macché* (= definitely not) inform that the Speaker assumes the incoming belief as definitely not true. *Mah* (= I don't know, I'm not sure) tells she is doubtful, *boh* (= I don't know, I am doubtful) and *chissà* (= who knows?), that she does not know, while *bah* (= gee, I don't know), pretends ignorance but in fact leaks perplexity and possibly disapproval. *Che?* (= what?!), *no!* (= I can't believe it!) express incredulity; *bum!* (= boom!), by imitating a shooting gun, alludes to the Italian idiom "*spararla grossa*" (to shoot a hard blow), meaning "You're telling a big lie".

*Beh*, *ehm*, *dunque* (= well) express hesitation, while *oh*, *tòh*, *no!*, *però!* (= wow!) express surprise. Actually, both indecision and surprise are in some sense a lack of assumption: before decision, the Speaker has two alternatives between which she does not know which to choose; and when she is surprised, a new incoming belief disconfirms her expectations, and she cannot find a belief that accounts for the new one.

Among the informative interjections concerning the state of the Speaker's goals, some regard her thwarted goals, by indicating various kinds of physical suffering: pain (*ahi*), cold (*brrr*), disgust (*bleah* = yuk), fatigue (*uffa*); and psychical suffering: boredom (*uffa*), displeasure and desperation (*ahimé!* = alas!, *peccato!* = what a pity!, *no!*), disappointment (the indirect meaning of *bèh?* = but why?), worry (*ñic*), indignation (*ohibò*), contempt (*puah*). Other interjections inform that a goal of the Speaker has been fulfilled: a specific goal, like to succeed in doing something (*là!* = there!), to be introduced to some person (*piacere* = nice to meet you) or to meet someone you have not seen for long (*uée!*), to feel a pleasant taste (*iùm!*), to find out some solution to a problem (*eureka*), to see some rival's goal thwarted (*ha!*, *tiè!*). Finally, one can tell a goal of one's is fulfilled, without specifying which goal it is (*òoh!*, *ecco*); while one can sometimes specify that the satisfaction for this fulfilment is particularly intense (*ihù*, *evviva*, *hurrà*).

Also the beliefs requested by interrogative interjections (Table 2) are connected with the Speaker's beliefs and goals. *Eh?*, *no?*, *vero?* are requests for confirmation, and in fact they are also frequently used as *tag questions*. *Eh?* and *come?* ask for an information already requested but not heard; *beh?* asks for explanation.

Among requestive interjections (Table 3), some specify the requested action, like *aiuto* (help), *silenzio* (shut up), *scìò* (a rude form of "go away"). Others instead are "pure" incitations, in that they solicit to get active, but they do not tell you what to do: *dài* (come on), *prego* (please), *su* (come on!). Among these, a specific performative may be marked: *dèh* prays, *suvvia* encourages. Others are incitations marked as to the "aspect" of action, since they do not specify the requested action, but they solicit the Addressee to start (*via!*, *sotto!* = go!), to stop or end (*stop*, *basta* = that's enough), to do it again (*bis*), to go on (*avanti* = go on). Finally, some are requests for attention (*ehi*, *ehilà*, *aho*).

The ones I call optative interjections (Table 4) include a great part of routine formulas: greetings like *ciao* (hello), *arrivederci* (goodbye) *buongiorno* (goodmorning); politeness formulas, like *grazie* (thanks) *salute!* (gesundheit!), *congratulazioni* (congratulations); wishing formulas, like *auguri* (wishes) and interjective idioms, like *in bocca al lupo* (an apotropaic way of wishing good luck: literally = get into the wolf's mouth). Within these we have a class of interjections I call "ejaculative", that include



invocations like *Gesù* (Jesus), *mamma* or *mamma mia* (mummy), *misericordia* (pity on me!) and imprecations, like *accidenti*, *Cristo* (Christ), *dannazione* (damn it), *merda* (shit).

There is also a group of interjections that in part are only informative while in part they can be either informative or optative, but whose semantic origin seems to be always the same. They are derived from three different sources, that I call: **vocatives**, **external force**, and **cacophemism**.

**Table 1.** Informative interjections

| TYPE              |                            | SPECIFIC MEANING    | EXAMPLE   |  |         |                             |
|-------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|---|--|---------|-----------------------------|
| Beliefs           |                            | Understanding       | <i>Ah</i>   |  |         |                             |
|                   |                            | Acknowledgment      | <i>Già</i>  |  |         |                             |
|                   |                            | Confirmation        | <i>Caspita, davvero, diamine, eh, mhm, oh, okay.</i><br><i>Appunto, anzi! Cacchio, cavolo cazzo, certo, diavolo, ostia!</i><br><i>Proprio, sì, sicuro, vero, altro che!</i> |  |         |                             |
|                   |                            | Negation            | <i>Macché, see..., ñc, Affatto</i>  |  |         |                             |
|                   |                            | Ignorance           | <i>Bah, boh, chissà, mah</i>  |  |         |                             |
|                   |                            | Incredulity         | <i>Bum!, che!</i><br><i>No!</i>   |  |         |                             |
|                   |                            | Doubt or hesitation | <i>Beh, èeh, ehm, mhm, mah</i><br><i>Allora, cioè, così, dico, dunque...</i>  |  |         |                             |
|                   |                            | Surprise            | <i>Ah, ih, oh, òh, olla, toh, uh, caspita, caspiterina, cribbio, diamine, ullallà</i><br><i>Accidenti, boia, cacchio, capperi, cazzo...</i>                                 |  |         |                             |
|                   |                            | Goals               | Thwarted goals  | Physical disease                             | Pain    | <i>Ahi, ahia, ahio, uhi</i> |
|                   |                            |                     |   |  | Cold    | <i>Brrr</i>                 |
|                   |                            |                     |   |  | Disgust | <i>Bleah, puah</i>          |
|                   |                            |                     |   |  | Fatigue | <i>Aùff, uffà</i>           |
| Psychic suffering | Boredom or annoyance       |                     |   | <i>Uffa, uh</i>                              |         |                             |
|                   | Resignation                |                     |   | <i>Pazienza</i>                              |         |                             |
|                   | Contempt                   |                     |   | <i>Puah, pfui, poh</i>                       |         |                             |
|                   | Displeasure or Desperation |                     |   | <i>Ahimè, ohimè, no!</i><br><i>Peccato</i>   |         |                             |
|                   | Worry                      |                     |   | <i>Nc</i>                                    |         |                             |
|                   | Shudder                    |                     |   | <i>Aaah! Noo!!</i>                           |         |                             |
|                   | Indignation                |                     | <i>Èeh, ohibò, ooh</i>  |  |         |                             |
|                   | Disappointment             |                     | <i>Acciderba, accipicchia, alé, beh?, caspiterina, cribbio, diamine</i><br><i>Vacca, la Madonna</i>   |  |         |                             |
| Achieved goals    | Generic                    |                     | Satisfaction  | <i>Aah, òh, òòh, ecco, meno male</i>         |         |                             |
|                   |                            |                     | Exultance   | <i>Evviva, hurrà, iuhù, Alleluia, osanna</i> |         |                             |
|                   | Specific                   |                     | <i>Aah, eureka, ha iùm, maramèò, tiè, uéé!, vivaddio, ecco, là, piacere, mi rallegro</i>  |  |         |                             |

**Table 2.** Interrogative interjections

| TYPE                       | EXAMPLES  |
|----------------------------|---|
| Requests for confirmation  | <i>Eh?, nevrero?</i><br><i>Davvero?, no?, vero?</i> |
| Requests to tell or repeat | <i>Eh?, beh?,</i><br><i>che?, come? Cosa?</i>       |
| Requests for explanation   | <i>Beh?</i>   |

**Table 3.** Requestive interjections

| TYPE             |                           | SPECIFIC MEANING | EXAMPLES   |
|------------------|---------------------------|------------------|--|
| Generic requests | Attention request         |                  | <i>Aho, ehi, ehilà, ohé, ohilà, èst, uehi, uehilà</i>  |
|                  | Pure incitations          |                  | <i>Alé, avanti, coraggio, dài, prego, su</i>   |
|                  | Marked as to performative | Pray             | <i>Dèh</i>   |
|                  |                           | Encourage        | <i>Orsù, suvvia, coraggio</i>  |
|                  |                           | Forbid           | <i>No</i>  |
|                  | Marked as to aspect       | Start            | <i>Marsch!, sotto!, via!</i>   |
|                  |                           | Go on            | <i>Avanti</i>  |
|                  |                           | Do again         | <i>Bis</i>   |
|                  | Miscellaneous             |                  | <i>Altolà. Arri, pardòn, scç..., scìò, ss..., tè tè, aiuto, allegria, avanti, calma, cuccia, largo, perdono, permesso, prego, pietà, pista, pronto, scusa, silenzio, soccorso, sveglia, vergogna, via, va là</i> |

**Table 4.** Optative interjections

| TYPE         |                     | EXAMPLES   |
|--------------|---------------------|--|
| Ejaculations | Invocations         | <i>Gesù, Madonna, mamma, Maria, misericordia</i>   |
|              | Imprecations        | <i>Cribbio, perbacco, perbaccolina, perdiana, Boia, cacchio, cavolo, Cristo, dannazione, diavolo, Dio, maledizione, merda, ostia</i> |
| Formulas     | Greetings           | <i>Arrivederci, addio, buonanotte, buonasera, buongiorno, ciao</i>   |
|              | Auguri              | <i>Auguri, in bocca al lupo, cento di questi anni</i>  |
|              | Politeness formulas | <i>Complimenti, congratulazioni, condoglianze, grazie, rallegramenti, salute, salve</i>  |

Any time a speaker is surprised or disappointed by some event, he can express his surprise or disappointment by informative interjections like *però, tòh!, no!*. In some cases, though, that mental state is felt in such an intense way that he can need a more vivid or enhanced communicative action.

A first possibility – vocatives – is to call someone as a witness of the event at issue, in such a way as to remark how peculiar it is; in this case you can use vocatives like *gente!* (people!), *ragazzi!* (boys!), and you may do so very often and recurrently; so much that in the long run, beyond the performative of requesting attention conveyed by the vocative, an expression of surprise becomes idiomatically part of the meaning.

A second possibility – external force – is to curse or to make an appeal to some force to which you attribute the responsibility for that event, or the power to

neutralize it: hence, imprecations and invocations, like *Cristo!* or *mamma!*, which indirectly may imply remarking one's surprise.

A third strategy – cacophemism – is to express the intensity of the felt mental state by resorting to lexical items whose form or meaning is particularly crude or aggressive. This is the reason for using some lexical items that can be defined cacophemistic (the opposite of euphemistic, [16], [11]), like *boia* (executioner), *miseria* (misery), *vacca* (cow) *merda* (shit), that are cacophemistic as to their meaning; or *corbezzoli* (good gracious!, literally, arbutus!), cacophemistic as to the phonic appearance of the signal; or finally *cazzo* (cock), that is on both sides so.

Out of these three types of interjections, those stemming from vocatives can be used only to express surprise or disappointment, while those deriving from external force and cacophemism can be used, not only as informative interjections expressing surprise and disappointment, but also as optative ones, namely as invocations or imprecations. Moreover, among all three types some, like *cazzo!* (cock!), *diavolo!* (devil!) *diamine!*, *perbacco* (by gosh!) can also work as an emphatic confirmation, something like “Of course!” or “Definitely so!”.

## 9 Related Concepts

Once provided a clear definition of interjection, it is easier to distinguish it from other entities studied by Linguistics with which they have been sometimes put together across centuries: exclamations and onomatopoeia. Of course, there definitely is some overlapping between interjections and each of these phenomena. So the confusion is probably due to this partial overlap.

### 9.1 Interjection and Exclamation

Many interjections, and among them all ejaculations, are typically uttered with an exclamatory intonation. But this does not imply that every interjection is an exclamation or the other way around.

To single out commonalities and differences between interjection and exclamation, I will first propose a definition of the latter.

Exclamation is sometimes considered (see for example [17], [18]) as a type of sentence, and hence – in analogy with declarative sentences typically marked by a declarative intonation, or questions marked by interrogative intonation – as a type of intonation. Moreover, just as within interrogative sentences some are Wh questions, necessarily introduced by interrogative Wh pronouns (*who*, *how*, *what*, *where*...), also some exclamative sentences use Wh pronouns. For example:

(14) *What a pretty girl she is!*

(15) *How many people were there!*

Yet, in particular cases *any* sentence can be uttered in an exclamatory way, and, if written, it can be closed by an exclamation mark. So, what distinguishes an exclamation from a non-exclamatory sentence?

According to [18], an exclamatory sentence connotes all or part of the content of a sentence as unexpected. My hypothesis is that when a sentence is produced as an exclamation, in that either it has an exclamatory syntactic construction, or it is uttered with an exclamatory intonation, the Speaker has the goal to convey that she is feeling some emotion – sometimes just a generic emotional arousal, sometimes more specifically an emotion of surprise – concerning the content of the sentence. Thus a speech act produced in an exclamatory way conveys a generic emotional loading, but one of particular intensity, over the content of the speech act; generic in that the emotion felt is not specified from a qualitative point of view, or at most it is typically loaded with the emotion of surprise: that sentence or part of the sentence is viewed by the Speaker as unexpected, therefore surprising [6], [19], [11], and consequently more important to be conveyed. This is why an exclamation is often defined as a type of emphatic sentence [17].

This account of exclamation can perhaps explain why exclamations and interjections are often confused: the two phenomena have in common their being linked to emotional expression. Exclamation is a way to impress emotional loading to any communicative act, while interjections typically convey emotional states.

## 9.2 Interjection and Onomatopoeia

Again on the basis of our definition, it is easier to distinguish the notion of interjection from that of onomatopoeia, with which it has often been merged.

Onomatopoeia is in general a case of iconicity in a vocal language. By iconicity we mean [11] the fact that, in a communicative item, between the signal and the meaning there is a relationship of similarity by way of imitation: for example, the above mentioned gesture, *hand palm to Sender with index and middle finger in V shape moving back and forth in front of the mouth*, is iconic in that it imitates (aims at being similar to) some or all of the perceivable aspects that make part of the corresponding meaning, “to smoke”. Here the whole gesture, with the shape of the hand, its orientation, location and movement, imitates the action performed in smoking. The gesture is iconic in that it imitates the visual appearance produced by the action which constitutes its meaning. Similarly, a word like “*cock-a-doodle-do*” is iconic – onomatopoeic – in that with its sound it imitates the acoustic appearance of the sound produced by a rooster.

Thus onomatopoeia can be defined as the fact that some vocal signal with its sound imitates the sound produced by some event, action, object, animal or person which is the meaning of that signal.

Actually, if onomatopoeia is as defined, we can well say that some interjections are onomatopoeic. In Italian, for example, an onomatopoeic interjection is “*uffa*”, that expresses one is tired, bored, bothered or fatigued with something. The sound “*uffa*” imitates the air puff, the loud expiration one often emits when fatiguing in some effort. Another onomatopoeic Italian interjection is “*òoh!*”: an expression of satisfaction one utters when he has managed to do something he was striving for; and this too imitates the serene expiration emitted in relief, possibly due to when one finally relaxes after an effort that achieved the result hoped for.

But that some interjections are onomatopoeic does not mean that all of them are. Some interjections are not onomatopoeic – for example, the Italian interjection “*ah*”,

and the corresponding English “*oh*”, that mean “I acknowledge I am coming to assume a new belief”, do not seem to imitate sounds anyhow linked to their meaning. On the other hand, many onomatopoeic signals are not interjections, since they do not convey complete codified speech acts, comprised of a performative. For example, the signal “*cock-a-doodle-doo*” can be used in a sentence like

(16) *At dawn, today, I heard the rooster’s cock-a-doodle-do,*

where it works as a noun, therefore not a whole communicative act. Also in her motherese language a mother can often use an onomatopoeic signal as a noun for an animal:

(17) *Oh, here is the bow-wow!.*

In conclusion, onomatopoeic signals and interjections do not cover the same range of phenomena, since some interjections are not onomatopoeic and some onomatopoeic signals are not interjections.

## 10 “Primitive” Devices?

In general, what interjection and onomatopoeia have in common, and what accounts for their confusion, is that they are both characterized by some features which can be considered primitive, that is, cognitively simpler, and then probably of earlier emergence, than those typical of modern languages.

That interjections are a way of communicating somehow “primitive” has been acknowledged by ancient and modern scholars [20], and recently reaffirmed by language evolution research [9].

Some of the devices that make interjections more primitive than, for instance, sentences in a language, are the following.

### 10.1 Holophrastic Versus Articulated

At a high stage of language evolution, for instance in a modern verbal language, the most relevant feature is the device of articulation, due to the capacity for fractionation [21], thanks to which the semantic content of a communicative act comes to be split and distinguished into chunks, and each of them is conveyed through a single communicative unit, so that the whole communicative act is borne by a combination of units. From this point of view, an interjection is more primitive than a sentence, since it conveys a whole chunk of meanings through a single vocal unit.

### 10.2 Expressive Versus Communicative

As pointed out by [22], [6] and [9], an interjection differs from a sentence due to its, so to speak, “communicative status”. If we take an interjection and the corresponding sentence – for instance “*ouch!*” as against “*I am feeling pain*” – both convey the same internal mental state, but the former simply “expresses” it, while the latter “describes” it, it “communicates” it [6]. Let me define the difference between expression and communication in terms of two dimensions.

*Presence and awareness of the goal of communicating.* According to Poggi [11] we can distinguish three different cases in which meanings pass through from an agent A to an Agent B due to A producing a signal: a) ego-centered, or non-communicative expression; b) communicative expression; c) communication in the strong sense. Non-communicative expression, or more simply **expression**, as defined according to the etymological sense (Latin *ex-premere* = to push out), occurs when an Agent (not yet a Sender, strictly speaking!) feels some mental state and in order to give vent to it, but not in order to share it with someone else, produces a physical perceivable stimulus, which for an external observer can work as a signal in that it provides information, but which is produced by the Agent only to obtain relief from his internal state. If I smash a glass in anger, this is not necessarily aimed to communicate my anger to someone else; I may simply want to give vent to my emotion, to discharge the physiological arousal I feel [23]. This is a case of expression but not communication, in that it is not aimed to have some Addressee know something, it is not even a social action, it may, even, not take another into account.

On the opposite end we have **communication** in the strong sense – communication as defined by [24] and [25] – in which a Sender has a goal of having an Addressee believe some belief, but also has the goal for the Addressee to believe that the Sender has the goal to have him believe that belief. Communication in this strong sense necessarily implies some kind of meta-communication: I not only want you to know, but also want you to know I want you to know. Yet, communication in this sense is only possible with some kind of meta-consciousness or self-awareness of what one is communicating, and thus cannot be afforded by Senders with low levels of cognitive sophistication, like animals or human infants. But since constraining the very definition of communication to only conscious and deliberate human communication would imply too narrow a notion of it, a more basic definition of communication is needed: communication in a weaker sense, not a self-conscious nor a meta-communicative one.

Thus we have a third case in between ego-centered non communicative expression and communication in the strong sense. This is **communicative expression** (or **expressive communication**), which is a case of communication: the perceivable stimulus produced can be called a communicative signal since it is aimed to the goal of having someone else know something. Nonetheless, this is a case of communication in a weak sense, in that the Sender of the signal is not aware of his own goal of communicating.

In terms of this dimension – the presence and self-consciousness of the goal of having others know – all signals in a verbal language are in general cases of communication in this strong sense. On the other side, typical examples of expressive communication are some cases of facial expression, gaze, posture; finally, affect bursts [14] and music [26], [11] may sometimes be cases of expressive communication, but more often they are non communicative expression. Interjections may, very rarely, be non-communicative at all, but more typically they are communicative in the weak sense.

When we utter an interjection, we communicate some mental state, but, different from when we do so through an articulated sentence, we do not necessarily have a

high level of awareness of that mental state ourselves, nor do we need, therefore, to have a conscious goal that the other know we are feeling it.

*Types of meaning conveyed.* According to [11], any meaning of any possible signal belongs to one of three broad types of Information: 1. on the World (concrete and abstract events and entities – objects, persons, animals, times and places); 2. on the *Sender's Identity* (stable characteristics of the Sender: sex, age, culture, personality, image and self-image); 3. on the *Sender's Mind*: his/her mental states (beliefs, goals and emotions). Now, in expression, as opposed to communication in the strong sense, the beliefs conveyed do not concern Information about the World, but only Information on the Sender's Mind or the Sender's Identity.

In conclusion, in terms of the two criteria proposed, communicative status and type of meaning conveyed, we can define **expression** (both communicative and ego-centered) as the act of producing signals 1. about either one's identity or one's mental states (but not about states of the world) and 2. either with a non-meta-conscious communicative goal or without any goal of communicating at all.

And interjections typically belong to the field of **communicative expression**.

### 10.3 Context-Dependent Versus Context-Independent

Another aspect is peculiar of interjections as opposed to articulated sentences. The interjection, due to its being, as a deictic item, strictly linked to context, does not exhibit the property of displacement, a typical feature, according to [27], of verbal language. In a sentence we can talk about things that happened in the past or will happen in the future. With an interjection, instead, I can only express a mental state that is occurring right here and now. I can say

(18) *I am amazed with this now;*

or

(19) *I was amazed with this then;*

but while I can say

(20) *Wow!*

referring to something that I am coming to know right now, I cannot say

(21) *\*At that time, wow!.*

unless I am feeling that mental state again, right now.

In other words, an interjection can only be used “in praesentia” of (simultaneously with) the mental state it mentions: that mental state cannot be simply remembered or hypothesized, it must be *lived* at the time the interjection is uttered.

This can be connected with the above mentioned aspect of the interjections: their being deictic items. If the cause of the mental state must necessarily be retrieved through context, this is why an interjection can only be used when the mental state is being felt.

## 11 Conclusion

Interjection is a holophrastic signal that conveys information about the Speaker's mental states, and requests action and information from the Addressee or a third party, through a communicative device that does not imply meta-consciousness and does not allow displacement in space and time. Nonetheless, this peculiar type of language is rich and deep in the communication of our mental reality.

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