

Interjections

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Interjections

Interjections are words that conventionally constitute utterances by themselves and express a speaker's current mental state or reaction toward an element in the linguistic or extralinguistic context (see **Context, Communicative**). Some English interjections are words such as *yuk!* 'I feel disgusted', *ow!* 'I feel sudden pain', *wow!* 'I feel surprised and I am impressed', *aha!* 'I now understand', *hey!* 'I want someone's attention', *damn!* 'I feel frustrated', and *bother!* 'I feel annoyed'. Such words are found in all languages of the world. This article surveys the different uses and definitions of the term 'interjection' and the different types of interjections that are found in the languages of the world. It also explores the relationship of interjections to other pragmatic devices such as particles, discourse markers, and speech formulae. (see **Formulaic Language**).

The Definition of Interjection

Interjections may be defined using formal, semantic, or pragmatic criteria. From a formal point of view, an interjection is typically defined as a lexical form that (a) conventionally constitutes a nonelliptical utterance by itself, (b) does not enter into construction with other word classes, (c) does not take inflectional or derivational affixes, and (d) is monomorphemic (see **Inflection and Derivation**).

This definition characterizes the core members of the interjection class. It captures most of the elements that have traditionally been described as interjections. In many languages this includes (a) words that are used to express emotions such as disgust and its related feelings, for example, English *yuk!*, *ugh!*, and *phew!*, German *pfui!*, Dakota *xox!*, Polish *fu!* and *fe!*, Russian *fu!*, and Danish *fy!*; (b) words and expressions for greetings, leave-taking, thanking, apologizing, etc. (English *hello*, *thank you*, and *goodbye*, French *adieu*); (c) swear words (English *shit!*, French *merde!* and *sacredieu!*); (d) attention-getting signals (English *hey* and *psst*, Russian *a'u*, Japanese *oi* and *nee*); (e) some particles and response words (English *yes* and *no*, Japanese *hai* and *ii*); (f) words directed at animals (English *whoa*); and (g) onomatopoeic words and iconic (see **Iconicity**) depictives (Polish *sza* 'hush' and *hu-hu* 'boo').

It, however, excludes some other items, such as English *well*, which have sometimes been included in the interjection class, because they are not capable of forming independent nonelliptical utterances. Some scholars believe that the formal definition, which is essentially the traditional definition, is too broad since it encompasses different semantically definable classes such as speech formulae that could be distinguished from the typical interjections on semantic grounds.

From a semantic point of view, prototypical interjections may be defined as conventionalized linguistic signs that express a speaker's current mental state, attitude, or reaction toward a situation. This definition narrows down the class of interjections and excludes onomatopoeic words, for example, which are descriptive rather than expressive.

In terms of pragmatics, interjections are context-bound linguistic signs. That is, they are tied to specific situations and index elements in the extralinguistic context. They cannot be fully interpreted unless they are situated in the appropriate discourse (see **Discourse Markers**) and social context. Being context-bound (i.e., indexical (see **Pragmatic Indexing**)) interjections embody presuppositions about discourse and social context that could be explicated in terms of propositions (see **Propositions**). For instance, if someone utters the English *ouch!*, he or she indexes himself or herself as experiencing a sudden and sharp pain. Once the speaker is identified, this utterance can be fully interpreted.

The interpretation of other interjections, however, involves not only contextualization and substitution of elements in the context for arguments in the propositions underlying them, but also complex processes of conversational inference (see **Inference: Abduction, Induction, Deduction**). That is, the arguments in the propositions underlying the interjections are not fully specified as in the case of *ouch!*. The identity of the arguments is open to context-based inference. For instance, one of the propositions underlying the Russian *porá* as an interjection is 'it is time for someone to do something that is given by the context'. The 'someone' in the proposition can be the speaker, the hearer, or both. The exact identity of the agent of the action is figured out by inference. It cannot be filled out by a straightforward substitution of the contextual elements for the arguments in the proposition.

Closely related to their indexical nature is the fact that interjections are typically and commonly accompanied by physical gestures (see **Gestures: Pragmatic Aspects; Kinesics**). For instance, in some

languages of West Africa (e.g., Akan, Éwé (Gbe), and Ga-Dangme), there is an interjection, *atúù!*, which is used to welcome people and is uttered at the same time as the interlocutors hug each other. Sometimes physical gestures may substitute for interjections. For this reason, the boundary between gestures as semiotic signs and interjections as linguistic signs is sometimes hard to draw.

Characteristics of Interjections

Interjections tend to be phonologically and morphologically anomalous. They may be made up of sounds and sound sequences that are not found in other parts of the language. In English, the interjection spelled ‘tut-tut’ is phonetically a series of dental clicks – sounds that are not used otherwise in the language. Some English interjections do not contain any vowels, for instance, *psst!*, *sh!* From the point of view of the main sound system of English, these are ‘nonwords’. However, phonological anomaly is not a definitive criterion for the class of items because there are other interjections that conform with the patterns of the main sound system (e.g., English *yuk*).

Morphologically, interjections do not normally take inflections or derivations in those languages that make use of such forms. This is one of the reasons why they have been classified together with particles and other uninflected words like adverbs (see **Adverbs**). It should be noted here that some interjections that evolve from verbs (see **Verbs**) could carry a particular inflection, but they do not obey the agreement rules of the language in question. In other words, the inflections together with the verb stem have become frozen and form a completely new word. Notice that although the French form *tiens!* ‘look!, hey!, here!’ is homophonous with the second-person singular form of the verb *tenir* ‘to hold’, *tiens!* is used as an interjection to both singular and plural.

Most interjections are simple monomorphemic words. However, some interjections seem to be formally complex. Thus, there are multimorphemic ones that constitute a phonological word such as English *Goddammit!* These may be referred to as complex interjections. The French forms of *oh là là!*, *he là!*, and *hop là!*, for instance, may be included here. Apart from these, there are multiword expressions, phrases, which can be free utterance units and refer to mental acts, for example, English *bloody hell!*, *dear me!* *thank God!*, etc. These utterances may be referred to as interjectional phrases. They usually have peculiar syntax.

Since interjections are words that can constitute utterances by themselves, the term ‘interjection’ may be used to describe either a word class or an utterance

type. When it is used in reference to a sentence type, it is considered to be a minor sentence type.

Types of Interjections

There are different ways of classifying interjections. One classification is based more or less on the form of the interjection and the other on the communicative function of the interjection. Along the formal dimension, interjections may be divided into two broad classes: primary interjections and secondary interjections.

Primary interjections are little words or ‘non-words,’ which in terms of their distribution can constitute an independent nonelliptical utterance by themselves and do not normally enter into construction with other word classes (English *Gee!*, *Oops!*, etc., French *Aïe!*, *Hem!*, Longgu (Austronesian) *sss* ‘I want you here’, and *ηηη* ‘I feel relaxed’).

Secondary interjections are those words that have an independent semantic value but which can be used conventionally as nonelliptical utterances by themselves to express a mental attitude or state. Under secondary interjections fall such alarm calls and attention-getters as English *Help!*, *Fire!*, swear and taboo (see **Taboo Words**) words such as English *Fuck!*, *Screw!* French *Bordel!*, *Chiotte!*, and other words used emotively such as English *Bother!*, *Drat!*, etc.

In terms of their function, interjections can be categorized according to the traditionally recognized functions of language such as expressive, conative, phatic, etc. (Bühler, 1934; Jakobson, 1960). This functional classification is based on what is perceived to be the predominant function of the item in question with respect to its semantics.

Expressive interjections are vocal gestures that are indicative of the speaker’s mental state. They may be subdivided into two groups: the emotive and the cognitive. The emotive ones are those that express the speaker’s state with respect to the emotions and sensations they have at the time (English *Yuk!* ‘I feel disgusted’; *Ouch!* ‘I feel sudden pain’; Western Arrarnta (Aranda; Australian) *yekaye* ‘I feel shocked’). Cognitive interjections are those that pertain to the state of knowledge and thoughts of the speaker at the time of utterance (English *Aha!* ‘I now know this’; *oh-oh!* ‘I now know something bad can happen’; Russian *ogo!* ‘I now know something surprising’; Éwé *ehē!* ‘I now remember’; Warlpiri (Australian) *karija* ‘I don’t know’).

Conative interjections are those expressions that are directed at an auditor. They are aimed at getting someone’s attention or they demand an action or response from someone (English *sh!* ‘I want silence

here'; *eh?* 'I want to know something'; Australian English *cooee* and Russian *a'u*, which are used to keep contact with people in the bush). Presentational interjections with the meaning 'I want you to take this thing I am holding out to you now', which are found in various languages, may be classified as conative interjections (e.g., Italian *to!*, Japanese *hai!* (in one use), Aranda (Australian) *me!*, and Gunwinggu (Mayali; Australian) *nja!*). Calls to animals, etc., also belong here as conative interjections.

Phatic interjections are used in the establishment and maintenance of communicative contact (*see Communicative Principle and Communication*). A variety of conventional vocalizations that express a speaker's mental attitude toward the ongoing discourse, that is, backchanneling or feedback signaling vocalizations (*see Conversation Analysis*), may be classified as phatic (English *mmm*, *uh-huh*, *yeah*). Included in this class also are interjections used in the performance of various interactional routines, such as greeting and leave-taking, and in the organization of discourse (e.g., English *OK*).

Interjections as Peripheral Elements

There are at least three senses in which one can talk about interjections as being peripheral to language. One is that interjections are peripheral to language as a whole: they are paralinguistic. Interjections are viewed as an accompaniment to language or communication rather than being a form of linguistic communication themselves. However, interjections form a distinct subset of paralinguistic vocalizations because of their conventionality. This conventional subset of paralinguistic elements seems to be on the boundary between verbal and nonverbal communication. From that point of view, it seems true that interjections are somehow peripheral to language.

Another interpretation of the peripherality of interjections is based on their syntactic independence. Since interjections do not enter into construction with other elements, they are not well integrated into the clause grammars of languages.

Finally, because some interjections are made of sounds that are not found elsewhere in the language system, they are said not to belong to the main sound system. However, phonological aberrance is not restricted to interjections alone but is a feature also of other elements in natural languages such as pronouns and demonstratives, which are considered by linguists to be part of the core of the language system. For instance, in Ngan'gityemerri (Australian), the palatal nasal [ɲ] occurs word initially only in two words in the language: in the second-person singular pronoun

niji 'you' and in the onomatopoeic word *nurrɲ* 'sniff'. These words display a peculiar phonological structure with respect to the rest of the language. Similarly, in English the sound [ð] occurs word initially only in pronouns, demonstratives, and other deictic (*see Deixis and Anaphora: Pragmatic Approaches*) elements such as *this*, *that*, *they*, *there*, and *then*. Such words are also thus phonologically anomalous, but they have not been thought of as peripheral linguistic elements. The peculiar phonology of some interjections should therefore not be used as an argument for considering interjections as peripheral to the language system.

Interjections, Pragmatic Devices, and Pragmatic Functions

Interjections share their context-boundedness with other pragmatic devices, viz., particles, vocatives, and routines (*see Pragmatics: Overview*) in general. That is, they are all produced in reaction to a linguistic or extralinguistic context and can be interpreted only relative to the context in which they are produced. Nevertheless, interjections form a distinct class. They differ from particles in their relative syntactic independence. That is, whereas particles are fully integrated into the syntax of utterances and cannot constitute independent nonelliptical utterances by themselves, interjections can be utterances by themselves and they are always separated by a pause from the other utterances with which they may co-occur. Interjections always constitute an intonation unit by themselves. They are only loosely integrated into the grammar of the clause. This feature of interjections as both words and utterances sets them apart from other word classes including particles.

Interjections are a category of routines – linguistic expressions whose occurrence is socially defined with respect to standardized communication situations and which are produced automatically (or semiautomatically). Some researchers believe that because of this there is no difference between prototypical interjections and one-word routine formulae (*see Formulaic Language*). Others believe that there is a fundamental difference. The latter argue that linguistic activities involving interjections do not constitute conversational encounters nor are they speech acts (*see Speech Acts*), whereas formulae always involve conversation and are speech acts. Closely allied to this difference is the claim that interjections do not have addressees, although they may be directed at people who are the intended interpreters of the communicative act in which they are involved (compare *She said thank you to him* and *She said wow to him*).

Note that *thank you* is a formula and *wow* is an interjection. Nevertheless, interjections and formulae share a number of commonalities: both are forms of language that are found in most, if not all, languages, yet they encode culture-specific meanings in these languages; both forms are also indexical. It is traditional for both types of words to be described as interjections, but such a use of the term interjection is too broad.

Some interjections may be used as discourse markers. That is, they may serve to mark the boundaries of discourse units (e.g., English *oh*, *ah*). Other interjections can function as interrogative tags (e.g., English *It's tasty, eh?*).

Interjections share their anomalous phonological nature with onomatopoeic words. For this reason, descriptive grammars usually include onomatopoeic words and iconic depictives as a subclass of interjections. Furthermore, some interjections, like onomatopoeic words, do display a fair amount of sound symbolism. Nevertheless, one can still distinguish between interjections and onomatopoeic words and ideophones. First, onomatopoeic words, etc., tend to be descriptive rather than expressive of a mental state as interjections are. Second, the ideophones, etc., may not be able to stand on their own as utterances without being elliptical. Notice that the use of interjections as utterances in themselves does not involve ellipsis.

Issues in the Analysis of Interjections

As mentioned earlier, interjections are simultaneously words or lexemes and utterances. This feature has consequences for their grammatical and semantic analysis. The grammarian is unsure as to whether they are words or sentences. The semanticist or lexicographer does not seem to have an adequate means of dealing with lexemes, which both predicate and refer, as interjections do by virtue of being utterances. From the point of view of pragmatics, the debate about whether or not interjections are speech acts remains to be resolved. Some of these problems and research on different types of interjections in several languages of the world have been discussed in a special issue of the *Journal of Pragmatics* (Ameka, 1992).

See also: Adverbs; Communicative Principle and Communication; Context, Communicative; Conversation Analysis; Deixis and Anaphora: Pragmatic Approaches; Discourse Markers; Formulaic Language; Gestures: Pragmatic Aspects; Iconicity; Indexicality: Theory; Inference: Abduction, Induction, Deduction; Inflection and Derivation; Kinesics; Pragmatic Indexing; Propositions; Speech Acts; Taboo Words; Verbs.

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