

ENGLISH INTERJECTIONS AS A WORD CLASS: A TRI-STRATAL DESCRIPTION

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First received: 24 February 2017

Final Proof Received:

Abstract

Traditionally known as interjections, the highly conventionalized linguistic forms like *aha*, *hey*, *ouch*, *oh*, *sh*, etc. have not been recognized as a word class in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). A proximate word class that does get acknowledged in SFL is the continuative (typically represented by *well*, *oh*, *yes*, *no* and *now*), while other members in the traditional class of interjections tend to be treated as bi-stratal forms in language, if not protolanguage. Studies that are non-SFL driven have affiliated interjections with routines, formulae, discourse particles, discourse markers, etc. Such terminological complexity can be solidified and cleared if interjections are perceived as a word class under the SFL framework. The present paper, thus, proposes to discuss interjections across the language strata – from below (phonology and graphology), from around (lexicogrammar), and from above (semantics, in terms of the metafunctions). This holistic view will contribute to linguistic description of interjections and help enhance the understanding of interjections as a word class.

Keywords: interjection; word class; minor clause; minor speech function

INTERJECTIONS: WORD CLASS VS. MINOR CLAUSE

The notion of word classes provides “the most general categories” for classifying lexical items (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985, p. 73, italics in the original). The word class of interjections, e.g., *aha*, *hey*, *ouch*, *sh*, is primarily used to encompass the words that do not easily fit into any other class. Namely, for the words that cannot be put into nouns, or verbs, etc., they are thrown into “interjections”. As Quirk *et al.* (1985, p. 853) have observed, such words “do not enter into syntactic relations”, and are “purely emotive”, as the name “interjection” suggests. However, the two defining features do not comprehensively capture the functions of these expressions in actual use. As a result, items like *hi* and *bye* are found to be subsumed under routines or formulae (e.g., Coulmas, 1981; Quirk *et al.*, 1985, p. 852), and items like *well* and *oh* are regarded as discourse particles or discourse markers (e.g., Schiffrin, 1987; Schourup, 1985; Zwicky, 1985). Not only different terms have been proposed to describe interjections, but the term “interjection” is also used to refer to a word class, as well as an utterance type (sometimes interchangeable with exclamation) since some interjections can constitute independent utterances (Ameka, 2006, p. 744).

The terminological diversity stems from different orientations in different studies. Some prioritize grammatical features (the observation that interjections do not enter into syntactic relations), while others highlight their functions (that interjections are used to express affectual responses, to enact social relations by way of greeting, and to

connect the current utterance to the previous discourse). From an SFL view, these different perspectives locate at the strata of lexicogrammar and semantics respectively, which seems to indicate that the content plane of interjections possibly expands into lexicogrammatical and semantic strata. As conventionalized elements in language, interjections also expand their expression plane into the strata of phonology and graphology.

In the existing systemic functional description, interjections are covered under minor clauses. Minor clauses do not display transitivity structure, mood structure, or theme structure, and they are used to realize minor speech functions of five types—exclamations, calls, greetings, alarms, and continuity (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 153-154; Matthiessen, 1995, p. 433). Exclamations (e.g., *Wow!*) express the speaker’s affectual response that is not directed at anyone in particular. Calls (e.g., *Hey!*), in contrast, have specific addressee—by using a call, the speaker draws the attention from intended listener(s) and invites them into the conversation. Greetings are the expressions we use to say *hi* or *bye* to others; well-wishings are also included in this category. Alarms are exclamatory expressions with specific addressee, and are subdivided into warnings (e.g., *Sh!*) and appeals (e.g., *Hey!* in certain contexts). Continuity is realized by the continuatives that can function as an independent move on their own (e.g., *Uh-huh.*), and are thus included as a type of minor clause.

It is worth noting that while major clause types and major speech functions locate at the strata of: lexicogrammar and semantics respectively, minor speech functions and minor clause types are not

differentiated. This is because minor clauses like *Wow!*, *Yuck!*, *Aha!* and *Ouch!* are viewed as protolanguage (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 153), where only two strata exist—content and expression (cf. Halliday, 1975). Focusing on grammar, it is reasonable to regard all minor clauses as bi-stratal, so there is no need to talk about a word class that do not enter into grammatical construction. This viewpoint, however, seems to overlook the paradigmatic axis of grammar that essentially distinguishes SFL from other linguistic theories which focus primarily on the syntagmatic axis of grammar. From a paradigmatic aspect in terms of the lexical set, say, an exclamation realized by *Great!* seems closer to *Beautiful!* or *Excellent!* than to *Oh!*, *Wow!* or *Yay!* (by reasons that will be explored further below), where the former three can be grouped into adjectives, and the latter into what is now called interjections. In addition, the idea that a minor clause *realizes* a minor speech function (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 153), my emphasis again seems to lend support to the stratification into lexicogrammar and semantics. The recognition of lexicogrammatical stratum for minor clauses also increases the descriptive power for minor clauses that do show “traces of structure” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 153).

The present paper, thus, intends to take a tri-stratal perspective in describing interjections as a word class by systematically summarizing shared features of members in this class. Minor speech functions then would be considered locating at the stratum of semantics, which are realized by minor clauses at the lexicogrammatical stratum. The following will make a preliminary attempt to describe interjections from below (phonology and graphology), from around (lexicogrammar), and from above (meaning/metafunctions) respectively.

A TRI-STRATAL DESCRIPTION

From Below: Phonology and Graphology

Interjections are so conventionalized that they exhibit two alternative modes of expression: sounding (phonology), and writing (graphology). In terms of phonology, most interjections are monosyllabic (e.g., *wow*, *oh*, *ah*, *ouch*); only a few of them are polysyllabic (e.g., *goddammit*, *uh-huh*). Some members only consist of consonant(s), e.g., *psst*, *sh*, which rules them out of the main sound system in English for word formation. For those containing vowels, the length of the vowel can be pronounced at the speaker’s discretion. The consonants are also commonly lengthened.

In terms of graphology, the spelling of interjections is, on the one hand, very inert—interjections do not take any inflectional or derivational forms; on the other hand, it is very flexible—as reflection of the lengthened vowels or consonants, certain letters in interjections can be

repeated (e.g., *ooh*, *shh*), and such repetition does not result in misinterpretation, which is probably because interjections are non-experiential (see below). Further, in contrast to words with experiential meaning, the recurrence of a certain letter in an interjection is usually not considered as misspelling, but rather as a way of intensification, a common mechanism of graduation for interjections. When appear in a text, interjections are often separated from other elements by punctuation like exclamatory mark, comma, full stop, etc.

From Round about: Lexicalization and Grammatical Reactance

At the stratum of lexicogrammar, the focus is on the relations the word class enters into, including both paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations, and for both axes, the relationship can be established in terms of lexis as well as grammar. As interjections do not enter into syntactic structures, the paradigmatic relation does not involve co-selection of grammatical systems. In terms of the lexical set, interjections form a relatively closed set of words (Quirk *et al.*, 1985, p. 74). That is to say, the number of members in this class is not unlimited. Syntagmatically, again owing to their structural reactance, interjections do not typically collocate with other lexical items, though the probability of the occurrence of *dear* or *no* might increase given the presence of *oh* with a range of two words. When an interjection constitutes part of a clause, it usually appears at the very beginning of the clause. Continuatives also commonly occur in the middle area of the clause. More interestingly, interjections can show up at the end of the clause. In none of the situations will the interjection cause a change in the clause structure, or morphological changes of other elements in the clause. The syntactic independence, as mentioned before and shown below in Example 1 (interjections marked in bold), is graphologically reflected by punctuation, separating interjections from other linguistic elements.

Example 1. Interjections at the beginning, middle, and end of clauses

Hey, I know that guy.

and you are going to stay in there until you’re older than, **ah**, you know, her.

How about a story, **huh**?ⁱ

Some notes are worth adding to *huh* in the last subtitle in Example 1. The *huh* seems to function in a similar manner to a mood tag, but in this case, it occurs in an interrogative rather than a declarative. The *huh* here is closer to the Negotiator in Japanese: it appears at the very end of the clause, when the speaker is about to hand over the move to the interactant; it functions to add the negotiatory value to the clause; and it is optional (Teruya, 2004, p. 191). Unlike the Japanese Negotiator, which can be

obligatory in certain cases, English Negotiators seems always optional.

Here we can also look at interjections in terms of rank scale in the lexicogrammatical stratum. For most interjections, when they realize minor clauses by themselves, e.g., *Wow!*, they are morphologically the same in all ranks of morpheme, word, group, and (minor) clause, and only a few multimorphemic members like *goddammit* would be exceptions. A further note will be made later at the group rank, when a minor clause is realized by a multi-word expression containing at least one interjection.

From above: Metafunctions and Attitudes

At the stratum of semantics, meaning realized by interjections can be perceived in terms of the three metafunctions. Ideally, interjections are not experiential. That is to say, interjections have no role to play in the transitivity structure—they cannot function as participants, processes, or circumstances. They are only related to human experience in the sense that they can be used as reaction to a certain experience. Interjections can realize logical meaning to some extent, namely, to

signal certain relationship between the current speech and previous discourse. This logical function is realized by what can here be regarded as a sub-class of interjections, i.e., the continuatives. The name of the term is self-evident that it is used to *continue* the conversation. The logical perspective is more obvious in Eggins and Slade’s (1997) system (see Figure 1). In developing the system for speech functions in continuing moves, Eggins and Slade (1997) borrow directly from the logico-semantic relations of elaboration, extension, and enhancement. Interjections alone, however, cannot indicate the specific type of expansion as they are non-experiential. Thus, for the continuative that functions as an independent move, it stops at the “continue” level and is unable to get to the most delicate end in the system in Figure 1; for the continuative that is part of a major clause, the specific logical relation will depend on the major clause. The latter type of the continuative, which is considered as part of a major clause, is more commonly known for its textual function—when an interjection appears at the beginning of the clause, it is regarded as the textual Theme of the clause.

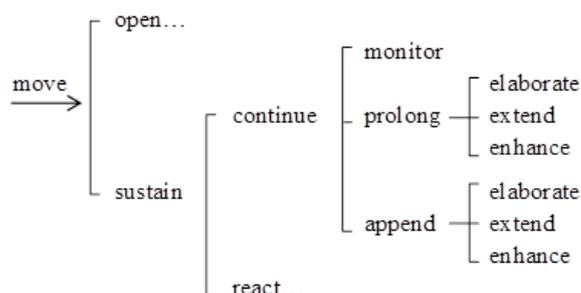


Figure 1. Sustaining: continuing speech functions in casual conversation (adapted from Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 195)

As a typical oral feature, interjections more actively realize interpersonal meaning, whereby we can “express our appraisal of and attitude towards whoever we are addressing and what we are talking about” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 29). As aforementioned, interjections are found to realize minor speech functions of exclamations, calls, greetings, alarms, and continuity. From an attitudinal perspective, some interjections are highly conventionalized to express certain kind of affect, e.g., *Wow!* (surprise), *Aha!* (jubilant satisfaction), *Ha(h)!* (happiness), etc. (cf. Quirk *et al.*, 1985, p. 853).

FURTHER TAXONOMY: PRIMARY, SECONDARY INTERJECTIONS AND INTERJECTIONAL PHRASES RE-DEFINED

Apart from recognizing continuatives as a special type of interjections based on their discursive function, we can also classify interjections into what Ameka (1992) calls primary interjections, secondary interjections, and interjectional phrases, with more

focus on their syntactic potential—whether an interjection has the potential to enter into syntactic relations with other words. According to Ameka, primary interjections (e.g., *ah*, *ouch*, *wow*, *oh*, *oops*) are the words that can only be used as independent utterances and not otherwise, whereas secondary interjections, besides having “an independent semantic value”, can also “be used conventionally as utterances by themselves”, can also “be used conventionally as utterances by themselves”, e.g., *Help!*, *Fire!*, *Careful!*, *Damn!*, *Heavens!*, *Christ!*, *Shame!* (Ameka, 1992, p. 111). Interjectional phrases are free utterance units comprising more than one word to express emotion, and examples given by Ameka (*ibid.*) include *Bloody hell!*, *Dear me!*, *My Goodness!*, *Thank God!*.

This concept of classification is helpful in discussing different sub-types of interjections, or minor clauses to be more specific. However, since language is not perceived as consisting of hierarchic strata in Ameka’s (1992) study, where the semantic stratum is not separated from the lexicogrammatical

stratum, the term “interjection” in his research seems to be used both as a functional label and as a word class. Consequently, secondary interjections in Ameka’s (1992) study, are actually “forms that belong to other word classes”, but “used as interjections” once they “occur by themselves non-elliptically as one-word utterances” (p. 105). To interpret the typological concept from the tri-stratal perspective adopted in this paper, secondary interjections could refer to the words that happen to share the same form with the words as non-interjections, e.g., *well*, *there*, etc. These words as interjections show different semantic values from the same forms as other word classes (noun/adverb, pronoun in the current case). Thus, expressions like *Fire!* would be interpreted as a minor speech function (alarm: appeal) realized by a noun, rather than a secondary interjection since it still shows the same semantic value when it is a noun in a major clause (e.g., *The building is on fire.*). Similarly, *Careful!* would be a minor speech function (alarm: warning) realized by an adjective, while *Dear!* would be a minor speech function (exclamation) realized by a secondary interjection. Compared with primary interjections, secondary interjections tend to be less universal in pronunciation.

Interjectional phrases would also be interpreted in a slightly different sense from Ameka (1992). Based on the defining features of interjections outlined above, interjectional phrases would include examples like *Oh my God!*, *Oh dear!*, *Oh man!*, etc., where the elements in the expressions do not display a Modifier-Head structure so cannot be reduced to a single word. Again since interjections are not experiential, interjectional phrases are called phrases not in the sense that they are contraction of (major) clauses, as the case in prepositional phrases. The examples of interjectional phrases given by Ameka (1992) would then not be regarded as interjectional phrases in the current study; *Bloody hell!*, *Dear me!* and *My Goodness!* would be interpreted as the minor speech function of exclamation realized by nominal groups, and *Thank God!* by a verbal group.

CONCLUSION

Drawing from SFL theory, this paper takes a holistic view for describing interjections as a word class on the grounds of shared features by members in this class as described in previous sections. The description unfolds tri-stratally in terms of phonology and graphology, lexicogrammar, and semantics. The advantage of this tri-stratal perspective is that linguistic functions (meaning) and syntactic features (form) are separated (by stratification) yet connected (by realization). In this way, different terms that are used to capture different aspects of interjections get united, and the relationship between minor speech functions and minor clauses are explicated as realization rather

than under-stratified content plane. The study also differentiates primary interjections from secondary interjections, and identifies interjectional phrases from a systemic functional aspect.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am greatly indebted to Prof. Giacomo Figueredo for his valuable comments during preparation of the paper. My sincere thanks also go to Dr. Peter White for his critical feedback in a previous draft of this paper. The paper is part of a larger project funded by China Scholarship Council (CSC).

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ⁱ From subtitles in *The Croods*. (2013). Directed by Kirk DeMicco, & Chris Sanders. Berlin: DreamWorks Animation.