

On conversational valence and the definition of interjections

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Abstract. Interjections, like some other word classes, have proven difficult to define in a principled way, and therefore there has been disagreement about whether some words belong to this class. Lists of interjections in grammars sometimes include arguably disparate items, e.g. greeting terms, along with words such as *oh* and *ah*. There has also been dispute about the possibility or necessity for interjections to be in a syntactic relation to other components, that is, about their valence. In this paper I propose a definition of *interjection* which involves an extension of *valence* in the usual syntactic sense, introducing the notion of *conversational valence* to distinguish between interjections and words such as *goodbye*. The latter can only be felicitously used when there is an addressee present, as well as the speaker, thus having a conversational valence of 2, while interjections do not require an addressee, i.e. their conversational valence is 1. For example, if I stub my toe I can appropriately say *ouch!* in the absence of anyone else. Interjections are distinguished by being the only linguistic items with such a low conversational valence.

Keywords. interjections, word classes, pragmatics, valence, greetings

1. Introduction¹

In this paper I propose a notion of the word class of interjections based on a restrictive definition which removes many items often claimed to belong to this class. The difficulty in reaching a definition of *interjection* is shown by the title of a paper by Cuenca (2002), ‘Defining the indefinable? Interjections’. Given this difficulty it is not surprising that, as Wharton (2000:176) says, ‘There is [...] no general agreement on how interjections can be defined’.

We can see the challenges facing those who would characterize the set of interjections if we look at some (attempted) definitions:

interjection (*n.*) A term used in the traditional classification of parts of speech, referring to a class of words which are unproductive, do not enter into syntactic relationships with other classes, and whose function is purely emotive, e.g. *Yuk!*, *Strewth!*, *Blast!*, *Tut tut!* There is an unclear boundary between these items and other types of exclamation, where some referential meaning may be involved, and where there may be more than one word, e.g. *Excellent!*, *Lucky devil!*, *Cheers!*, *Well well!* Several alternative ways of analysing these items have been suggested, using such notions as minor sentence, formulaic language, etc. (Crystal 2003:239)

interjection Traditionally [used] of forms that express ‘states of mind’ and do not enter into specific syntactic relations with other words: e.g. *Wow*, *Yuk*, *Phew*. Some [...] are also idiophones, with phonetic features peculiar to them.

A part of speech in ancient Roman accounts of Latin. Extended by some recent writers to a larger and more indeterminate category of which the traditional interjections are only part. (Matthews 2007:198)

Interjection: A conventional lexical form which (commonly and conventionally constitutes an utterance on its own, (typically) does not enter into construction with other word classes, is (usually) monomorphemic, and (generally) does not host inflectional or derivational morphemes. (Wilkins 1992:124)

¹ I thank two anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

By these criteria, exclamations such as *Good Lord!*, *Good heavens!*, *Christ!* or *Hell!* are not interjections, whereas those like *gee*, *wow*, *oops* or *ha* are. (Wierzbicka 2003:290)

One thing that may be noticed in most of these definitions is the fuzziness involved: Crystal speaks of an ‘unclear boundary’, Matthews of an ‘indeterminate category’ and Wilkins uses the words ‘commonly’, ‘typically’, etc. While the classification of words into parts of speech may sometimes present difficulties, ideally one would have a definition of a word class which at least in principle clearly delimits it. This problem arguably extends to Wierzbicka’s definition as well, although less obviously: how do we know when something has ‘a specifiable meaning’ (what is ‘a specifiable meaning?’), and what counts as a ‘mental state or mental act’? Likewise, in Crystal’s definition, how do we know whether something has a ‘purely emotive’ function? I am also dubious about Wierzbicka’s requirement for the non-homophony of interjections, as homophony across other word classes is quite common in some languages, e.g. English *run* as a noun and a verb. Why should interjections be different in this respect? Such issues may lead one to think that there is a need for a substantially different conception of interjections.

Cuenca (2002) presents a well-stated discussion of interjections, and I shall now focus on it, although I disagree with aspects of it, as will be seen below. She provides a summary of thinking about this part of speech (p. 30):

There are four main hypotheses on the nature of interjections [...]:

- (i) They are not grammatical nor even linguistic items.
- (ii) They can be grouped together with other categories, namely adverbs or particles.
- (iii) They are sentences or sentence-equivalents.
- (iv) They constitute a separate grammatical category.

An optimal treatment of interjections should account for these hypotheses although they are apparently incompatible, and should also allow [one] to select one of them as the starting point for the analysis.

I would argue for her (iv), as I will attribute a distinct property to interjections, although this might depend on what she means by ‘separate grammatical

category’, and for (iii), and I do not think they are necessarily incompatible with each other. She seems to hold (iii), as shown by the following quotation (ibid.: 31):

Additionally, interjections and adverbs have a different distribution and syntactic behavior, given that interjections, unlike adverbs, are syntactically independent, that is, they can stand on their own as utterances. Therefore, they are not sentence constituents, but sentence equivalents.

Although being ‘sentence-equivalents’ may distinguish interjections from adverbs, if one uses this as the only criterion for interjections, one will end up with a class of words which contains a variety of dissimilar items, as e.g. both *bello* and *ouch* can ‘stand on their own’. In fact, for many scholars interjections do include such a range of words, as we shall now see.

2. The ‘heterogeneous’ character of the class of interjections

With respect to word classes and interjections, Cuenca (2002:33) states:

We can conclude that the nature of interjections and their syntactic and discursive behavior is best understood if they are considered a peripheral class of the category ‘sentence’. Their specific attributes (i.e., invariability, possibility of encoding subjective values and dependence on context) are shared with other word classes. Therefore they are too broad to imply the existence of a different word class. On the other hand, their overall behavior does not fit in any of the generally accepted word classes.

It is not clear to me what she means by ‘broad’, but if she means that they include a wide variety of members, that could be grounds for restricting the class (which I will advocate). We see this wide range mentioned in another quote from her (Cuenca 2002:34): ‘Interjections are a heterogeneous class including onomatopoeic words, one word elements (*ouch*, *oh*, *wow*, *oops* ...), and phrasal elements (*thank you*, *good heavens*, *for God’s sake* ...)’.

Other authors have also commented on the heterogeneous character of interjections, e.g. Wharton (2000:173):

According to various definitions in the literature, interjections are a fairly heterogeneous class of items. Examples in English include *wow, yuk, aha, ouch, oops, ah, oh, er, huh, eh, tut-tut (tsk-tsk), brrr, shh, ahem, psst*, and even, according to some, *bother, damn, (bloody) hell, shit* (etc.), *goodbye, yes, no, thanks, well*. I will assume for the sake of argument that many of the above items do form a class, but will end up suggesting interjections are very disparate and should not all be treated as contributing to communication in the same way.

Cruz (2009:242) says that the ‘heterogeneity’ of interjections ‘prevents us from making generalisations over them’. In other words, interjections are such a varied set of items that one cannot say anything about the set as a whole. In such cases it might appear that such a group of items should not belong to a single class, as it is unlikely for there to be a natural class of items about which one cannot make any overall statements, i.e. when the items do not have anything significant in common.

One might consider some of the items cited in the quotations above not to be interjections; indeed Poggi (2009) excludes onomatopoeias from the class of interjections, as would I. As we shall see, I would not classify *thank you*, or *sorry* (which for Cuenca (p. 32) is also an interjection), as interjections; in my view they are quite different from e.g. *oh*. Cuenca (2002:34) quotes Givón (1984:84), who also asserts the lack of homogeneity of the set of interjections, ‘It is not a unified category functionally, morphologically or syntactically and it is highly language specific’.

Cuenca (ibid.) states, ‘These characteristics make it difficult to propose a unified and non-negative definition of interjections’, but this is exactly what I shall do, by positing a narrow class of interjections, which might appear to be an obvious solution. There is no such heterogeneity with most other word classes, e.g. nouns. Adverbs seem to be heterogeneous as well, as some of them modify verbs, others adjectives and adverbs, and still others have scope over entire clauses; in fact Nilsen (1972:179) says, ‘there seems to be a general consensus of opinion among grammarians [...] that the most heterogeneous, and the least understood of the traditional part-of-speech categories is, without question, the category of adverb’. I would disagree, since it seems to me that interjections, as often conceived of, are a more heterogeneous class (although it is difficult or impossible to measure this),

but nevertheless one certainly might wonder whether adverbs should be treated as a single part of speech. I am asking the same question about interjections.

3. A narrow notion of interjections

Consider the following remarks by Pinkster (1972/2006:38):

Adverbs are distinct from interjections. The latter do not only occur without a verb, but also do not need a verb (of emotion) to be understood. The expression of a particular emotion seems to be the very meaning of interjections [...] In this respect the Romans differed from Greek scholars, who did not recognize interjections as a class of their own. [...] We might say that adverbs have restricted sentence valence (that is, the ability to occur in a one-word-sentence), whereas interjections have sentence valence obligatorily.

Pinkster's main concern in this book was adverbs, not interjections, but, since the borderline between adverbs and interjections may not be entirely clear, he had to find some criterion which would separate interjections from adverbs, and that criterion involved 'sentence valence'. My conception of interjections was inspired by this passage, although I have taken up a different type of valence. The most common sense of (*syntactic*) *valence* (or *valency*) in linguistics has to do with the number of arguments that must occur with a particular item, e.g. a transitive verb has a valence of 2; Pinkster may not have been using it in this sense, but he made me think about valence in relation to interjections.

I would apply valence in a more general way, not only to the number of sentence components that must appear with an item, but also in a pragmatic/conversational sense to interlocutors, which I call *conversational valence*, defined as follows:

Conversational Valence: The conversational valence of a linguistic item (word, phrase or sentence) is the minimum number of participants who must be present in order for the utterance of it to be pragmatically well-formed.

This term has been used before, but in different senses, by Boisvert (1999), Hajek & Giles (2006) and Wirtz (2009).²

According to Trask (1993:144), an interjection is ‘a lexical item or phrase which serves to express emotion and which typically fails to enter into any syntactic structures at all’. I would argue that it need not ‘enter into any’ conversational participant structure either (other than of course the person who utters it); hence it has a conversational valence of 1 (for the speaker). I base my definition of *interjection* on this point:

Interjection: A word is a member of the word class of interjections if and only if its conversational valence is 1 (with this single required participant being the speaker).

Given the fact that interjections then would have a single (and simple) defining property, which is unique to them, it seems plausible to consider them as members of one word class.

For example, I can stub my toe and then say *ouch!* without anyone else being present, or say *ah!* if I am impressed or surprised by something, again with no one else being there. This is not true of the vast majority of linguistic items, e.g. it is pragmatically odd to say *goodbye* if I am alone, or to utter most words, phrases, or sentences (unless I am talking to myself).

² Below are quotations illustrating these other uses of *conversational valence*:

Boisvert (1999:72): ‘I claim that the right generalization is one that makes use of a certain notion of privilege or importance of an utterance. Call such conversational privilege or importance “conversational valence”’.

Hajek & Giles (2006:81): ‘For the “positive” and “negative” valence measures only, raters were instructed to regard the 0–6 scale in semantic differential terms, anchored by “very positive” and “very negative”. These ratings were then combined to form a more reliable measure of conversational valence.’

Wirtz (2009:21-22): ‘While there is significant evidence indicating that behavioral intention is a good predictor of behavior [...], it is not known whether the effect of conversation on perceived behavioral control would carry over to behavior. Finally, because the instructions included both positive and negative experiences associated with exercise, it is impossible to separate out the role that conversational valence may have played in the results. [...] future studies should consider valence of conversation. That is, are only positive conversations important or is the past information stored such that even negative conversations can have the unexpected effect of stronger perceived behavioral control?’

As can be seen, the senses of *conversational valence* in these authors are indeed quite unlike what I mean by it, as they have nothing whatsoever to do with the number of participants required to be present while something is being said.

That is, with the exception of interjections, as I define them, all linguistic items have a conversational valence of at least 2, since they require a speaker (or writer) and a hearer (or reader). While some verbs have a syntactic valence of 3 (i.e. ditransitive verbs), it is unlikely that any items have a conversational valence of more than 2, with the possible exception of 2nd person plural words such as the German pronoun *ihr* ‘you’ (informal plural). One might say that it is pragmatically odd to use *ihr* when addressing one person (or to use its singular counterpart *du* when addressing more than one person) in somewhat the same way as it is odd to say *goodbye* when one is alone.

Given the fact that interjections can occur in the absence of other linguistic items, i.e. that they do not have to be syntactically connected to a word, phrase or sentence, their syntactic valence is 0. This syntactic valence is not a defining property of them, since there are other words which also have a syntactic valence of 0, e.g. greetings and arguably imperatives (depending on how one sees their covert subject, i.e. whether it should be counted when considering valence). While interjections have a syntactic valence of 0 and a conversational valence of 1, the latter is their crucial property. (It seems that the minimum possible conversational valence is 1, i.e. one will not find words with a conversational valence of 0, since words cannot arise without at least a speaker.)

Note that when I refer to *valence*, of either the syntactic or conversational type, I mean the number of items/participants that must be present, not those which can be present. Probably the majority of authors have thought that interjections cannot be syntactically linked to other items, a view strongly stated by Cooley (1845:70): ‘The interjection being expressive of emotion only, is not confined to human language; and as it has nothing to do with the operations of the human intellect, is incapable of logical connection with other words in the construction of sentences.’ However, Pinkster (1972/2006:141) says, ‘what is less clear in Latin is whether interjections occur as constituents of larger expressions or not. Apparently, we find almost all case forms of noun phrases, notably accusative [...] and dative [...] in construction with interjections’. In any case, in my view what is important is that interjections do not have to be linked with other items (unlike e.g. conjunctions), not whether they can be so linked. From the conversational

point of view, interjections can be uttered when there is a second participant, but they do not have to be, and the latter fact is the more significant one.

My conception of interjections is admittedly a minority opinion, at least among modern linguists; for example, it is directly opposed to that of Elffers (2008:18), who says:

The traditional view of interjections, defended from Antiquity onwards, is that they express the speaker's feelings or emotions. It was incorporated in the earliest grammars of western European languages and continued in the grammars that followed.

As it turns out, however, this view adequately characterizes only a small subcategory of interjections. The main function of the majority of interjections is to make some appeal to the listener.

I would say that this 'small subcategory' makes up the only true interjections, and that the 'traditional view' is correct.

Let us now turn to some ideas that may go along with this narrow notion of interjections. There are various linguists for whom interjections are not (completely) linguistic items (e.g. Goffman (1981), whose term for 'exclamatory interjections' (p. 99) is 'response cries'). Possibly this is true of interjections in the narrow sense in which I define the class, but for a different reason than that/those which is/are sometimes given³—perhaps language must involve communication, and communication involves at least two participants.

In my definition of *interjection*, I disagree strongly with e.g. Elffers (2008:18), who says, 'In most cases interjections fulfil a variety of functions in which appeal to the listener is the central element', since for me the listener need not be present; interjections as I define them may be the only speaker-centred part of speech or type of utterance; admittedly this takes most putative interjections out of this class

³ Cram (2008:61) gives two grounds which have been behind the view of interjections as non-linguistic items: 'The first is that the interjection is inarticulate in the same way as animal calls are. The second is that the utterance of an interjection, in its paradigmatic form, is taken to be an involuntary act, in contrast to the conventionalised and arbitrary nature of language proper.'

and one might therefore argue that it would be better to take the words with a conversational valence of 1 out of the class of interjections and posit a new class for them, rather than positing a new class (or several new classes) for those supposed interjections that do necessarily involve a second participant. I would reject this move, since it seems to me that words such as *oh* and *ouch* are prototypical interjections, however one defines the class, while e.g. *goodbye*, if it is an interjection, is not a prototypical one.

This speaker-centered notion is anticipated by Jakobson (1960:354), as quoted by Elffers (ibid.:25): ‘The so-called EMOTIVE or “expressive” function, focused in the ADDRESSER, aims at a direct expression of the speaker’s attitude toward what he is speaking about [...] The purely emotive stratum in language is presented by the interjections.’

One might also say that the distinction between ‘expressing’ and ‘communicating’, as described by Poggi (2009:182), given below, may be getting at this notion of speaker-centered utterances, though Poggi would disagree with my definition of *interjection*:

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.

Her further (p. 183) remarks are along the same lines:

Noncommunicative 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. 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.

She says further (*ibid.*), now mentioning interjections: ‘Interjections may, very rarely, be non-communicative at all, but more typically they are communicative in the weak sense.’ This weak sense is when ‘the Sender of the signal is not aware of his own goal of communicating’ (*ibid.*). I am not certain what this means, but I would disagree that it is ‘very rarely’ that interjections are ‘non-communicative’—it is not very rare for someone to curse when they are alone and something bad happens.

My notion of interjections being words with a conversational valence of 1 was arrived at independently, but Ameka (1992:109) puts forth a similar idea, saying, ‘primary interjections do not have addressees, but formulae [e.g. *thank you*] have addressees.’ However, he then (*ibid.*) makes things less clear (in my view) by stating, ‘Interjections such as the conative and phatic ones may be directed at people, but they are not addressed to people’. I do not know what the difference is between being ‘directed at’ and being ‘addressed to’. Ameka continues (:110):

Formulae on the other hand are addressed to specific people [...] Related to this difference is the observation made by Goffman (1981:97, 104) that linguistic activities involving interjections are not conversational encounters although they may be socially situated. Formulae, I think, are both socially and conversationally situated.

In any case, what is new in my approach, as far as I know, is the use of the same structural notion, valence, at both a syntactic and pragmatic level, i.e. stating a parallelism between syntactic requirements and pragmatic requirements, and then positing the lowest possible valence at both levels for interjections—a syntactic valence of 0 (no subject, arguments or complements need be connected with an interjection) and a conversational valence of 1 (no hearer need be present).

Another feature of interjections is the kind of meaning that they (do not) have; Wharton (2000:183) states that ‘interjections do not contribute to the truth conditions of the utterances that contain them’. There are other linguistic items which have non-truth-conditional meaning, e.g. *but*, but we can say that interjections have only non-truth-conditional meaning, and unlike e.g. *good-bye*, which also has only non-truth-conditional meaning, they have a conversational valence of 1. Since they are the only kind of word which has this valence, characterizing interjections in terms of having only non-truth-conditional meaning

is not necessary. It does, however, lead to an interesting implicational statement: if an item has truth-conditional meaning, it must have a conversational valence of at least 2.

There is then the question that if words such as *goodbye* are not interjections, what are they? Jovanović (2004:19) says:

Certain authors in more recent books as Gramley & Pätzold (1992:125), for example, contend that interjections should include phrases and sentence[s] like *Good morning!* However, we are prone to believe here that utterances like these should form another segment of language which involves language formulae and stock phrases, which are themselves very close to interjections in the sense that they too can be exclaimed, but not necessarily so and should be considered as a different field in the domain of language use.

I would assert a somewhat similar view, that we need to posit a new part of speech, which should perhaps be called *formulae* (following Ameka 1992); its members will have no truth-conditional meaning but will have a conversational valence of 2 (making them different from most parts of speech, such as nouns and even conjunctions, which have truth-conditional meaning and a conversational valence of 2, and from interjections, which have no truth-conditional meaning and have a conversational valence of 1). This will accurately reflect the fact that greetings and words such as *please* are quite different in function and in nature from *ouch* and *oh*.

4. Conclusion

I shall conclude by again looking at the ‘heterogeneous’ character of interjections as this word class is often conceived of. If one examines definitions of *interjection* in grammars of various languages and dictionaries of linguistics, a dichotomy is sometimes evident—interjections do (at least) two quite different things. See, for example, (1), from a grammar of Latin, (2), from a grammar of Ottoman Turkish, and (3), from a Turkish dictionary of linguistics and grammar:

- (1) Harkness (1864:141):

‘Interjections are certain particles used as expressions of feeling or as mere marks of address.’

- (2) Deny (1921:702):

‘Nous distinguerons deux sortes de particules exclamatives ou interjections:

1° Les interjections interpellatives qui servent à attirer l’attention de l’interlocuteur pour l’appeler, l’interpeller, l’inciter à agir ou lui montrer un objet;

2° Les interjections affectives, de caractère subjectif, qui expriment les affections de l’âme (sensations ou sentiments).

Cette distinction n’est pas absolument rigoureuse: une interjection interpellative peut se nuancer d’une acception affective.’

(‘We shall distinguish two types of exclamatory particles or interjections:

1. Interpellative interjections, which serve to attract the attention of the interlocutor, to call him, question him, incite him to act, or to show him an object;

2. Affective interjections, of a subjective character, which express the feelings (sensations or sentiments) of the soul.

This distinction is not absolutely strict: an interpellative interjection can be nuanced with an affective sense.’)

- (3) Hengirmen (1999:378), definition of *ünlem* ‘interjection’:

‘Sevinme, üzüme, kızma, korku, şaşkınlık gibi duyguları belirten, doğa seslerini yansıtan ve bir kimseyi çağırmak için kullanılan sözcük. Ünlemler genellikle şu bölümlere ayrılır:

A) Ünlem Olan Sözcükler (Ünlem Soylu Sözcükler)

Bu ünlemler anlamlarına göre ikiye ayrılır.

a) Bir kimseye seslenmeye, onu çağırmaya yarayan ünlemler:

Oradan çekilsene be! [...]

b) Sevinç, üzüntü, kızgınlık, korku, şaşkınlık gibi duyguları belirten ünlemler:

A, ne kadar güzel bir manzara! [...]

Ay, başım çok ağrıyor!

(‘Word expressing feelings such as joy, worry, anger, fear, bewilderment, echoing natural sounds and being used to call someone. Interjections are generally divided into the following types:

A) Words Which Are [Originally] Interjections

These interjections are divided into two types according to their meanings.

a) Interjections serving to call out to someone, to call him:

Hey, get out of there! [...]

b) Interjections expressing feelings such as joy, distress, anger, fear, bewilderment:

Ah, what a beautiful view! [...]

Ouch, my head is hurting a lot!')

When we see this sort of dichotomy of functions, we might think that more than one part of speech is involved, one for each function. Interjections, as I have redefined them, have only one function (as ‘expressions of feeling’); the function of ‘marks of address’ is undertaken by another class. Interjections are a homogeneous word class, clearly delimited by a sole criterion, possession of a conversational valence of 1. If we have this criterion we need not be concerned with difficulties in determining the function of a word; the function of interjections is connected with their conversational valence, but is not a criterion for defining them.

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