

TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE RELEVANCE-THEORETIC APPROACH TO INTERJECTIONS

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1. Introduction

Interjections are communicative elements that individuals use to express their mental states, attitudes or reactions to perceived stimuli. Although they could be seen as instinctive, involuntary or uncontrolled verbalisations – *symptomatic signals* (Rosier 2000: 22; Schourup 2001: 1045; Kleiber 2006: 15; Światkowska 2006: 50) or *quasi-reflexes* (Nicoloff 1990: 214) – they do not have in many cases an instinctive nature (Światkowska 2006), for they involve the speakers' conscious evaluation of the spatio-temporal setting or the selection of an item from among a more or less wide set of possible candidates for what they want to express. Their formal features, such as their phonological anomalies and morphological peculiarities, relative syntactic independence and co-occurrence with other linguistic chunks in discourse, have confused grammarians throughout history and led some of them to regard them as paralinguistic or peripheral elements (e.g. Quirk et al. 1985). This consideration has resulted in a historical lack of agreement as to whether they are one of the traditional word classes or parts of speech².

Their language- or culture-specificity renders them in most cases so idiosyncratic that it is hard for translators to find out exact equivalents in other target languages (Fischer and Drescher 1996; Sierra Soriano 1999; Aijmer 2004). Since they do not have a constant meaning but are multifunctional and their meaning depends on the context where they are produced (Montes 1999; Rosier 2000; Aijmer 2004; O'Connell and Kowal 2005; Ameka 2006), some authors have given them a marginal place in the linguistic system (Światkowska 2006; Cueto

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² Nowadays, as opposed to those linguists who do not include interjections among their word classes (e.g. Huddleston 1988), for those who do so, interjections constitute an *open* (e.g. Buridant 2006) or *closed* class (e.g. Quirk et al. 1985; Greenbaum 2000), depending, evidently, on the criteria taken into account.

Vallverdú and López Bobo 2003; Ameka 1992a, 2006; Buridant 2006; Kleiber 2006). As a consequence, they have been almost completely forgotten over decades and have not received due attention in linguistics. Other authors have even associated them with different categories of linguistic elements, such as *particles* (e.g. Leech et al. 1982: 53-54; but see Ameka 2006; Evans 1992; Wilkins 1992), *discourse/pragmatic markers*³ (e.g. Schiffrin 1987; Montes 1999; but see Blakemore 1987; Fraser 1999, 2004; Wilson and Sperber 1993) or conversational routines (e.g. Barbéris 1995; Aijmer 2004, but see Ameka 1992a, 1992b, 2006; Wierzbicka 1991, 1992). Fortunately, that tendency has recently changed and over the last years there have arisen different classifications, which differentiate between the so-called *emotive/expressive* (1), *conative/volitive* (2), *phatic* and other types of interjections, depending on the criteria on which they are based (e.g. Wierzbicka 1991, 1992; Ameka 1992a, 2006; Montes 1999)⁴.

- (1) Yuk! Phew! Oh! Ow! Oops! Ouch!
- (2) Sh! Psst!

Other rather illuminating studies have addressed, for example, the usage of interjections in certain languages (e.g. Eastman 1992), their cross-linguistic peculiarities (e.g. Aijmer 2004), their acquisition by children and progressive incorporation in their speech (e.g. Meng and Schrabback 1999; Montes 1999), or their usage in rather specific interactional contexts (e.g. O'Connell and Kowal 2005; O'Connell et al. 2005; Shenhav 2008).

Nevertheless, those works have not satisfactorily solved some of their problems, such as what and how interjections communicate, and whether they are part of language. Within pragmatics, and more exactly, within the cognitive paradigm of relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004), Wharton (2000, 2001, 2003) has developed an approach to interjections aimed at solving these problems. This author proposes that, when they occur with utterances, they are linguistic mechanisms that help hearers recover the propositional attitude expressed by speakers toward the propositional contents of utterances. Thus, they encourage hearers to embed the propositions expressed by their interlocutors under speech-act or propositional-attitude schemas, and hence contribute to the recovery of what in relevance theory is labelled the *higher-level explicatures* of utterances. Accordingly, when interjections occur together with

³ I take the terms 'discourse marker' and 'pragmatic marker' to be equivalent. In fact, as Fraser (1999: 932) explains, in the vast literature on the topic there are a variety of labels that include 'cue phrases', 'discourse particles', 'pragmatic operators' and many others.

⁴ For the purposes of this paper, I will leave phatic interjections aside. For a discussion of phatic interjections, see Torres Sánchez (2000) and Torres Sánchez and Berbeira Gardón (2003).

another utterance, they would act as *illocutionary force indicating devices* (Evans 1992; Wilkins 1992; Wierzbicka 1991, 1992). On the contrary, when they constitute an utterance on their own, since they lack a constant semantic content, they simply indicate to the hearer, in a rather imprecise way, the speaker's mental or emotional state.

This paper does not deny the validity of Wharton's work and, more exactly, the claim that interjections guide the hearer to recover the higher-level explicatures of utterances. Rather, it seeks to suggest a different, more general approach based precisely on the observation of and reflection on some of the problems that it poses. Wharton's approach works with emotive/expressive interjections, but cannot be said to apply to conative/volitive ones. Moreover, in many cases interjections do not accompany a proposition, but appear alone, constituting full utterances, so they could not guide hearers in the recovery of their interlocutors' attitude toward a propositional content. Yet, in those cases the speakers can be assumed not to be willing to express their emotions or mental states, but to communicate something very specific: non-verbalised thoughts or a set of assumptions that could be explicated in terms of propositions. For this reason, this paper will argue that in the processing of interjectional utterances hearers may pragmatically enrich them thanks to some of their linguistic properties and contextual factors so as to obtain fully fledged propositions that correspond to what they think or sense their interlocutors intend to communicate. In order to do so, I will firstly summarise the current relevance-theoretic approach to interjections as put forward by Wharton (2000, 2001, 2003). Then, I will comment on some of its problems and review some other proposals about interjections on which this proposal is based⁵. Finally, I will introduce a new approach on which I am currently working. In this paper I will only deal with what interjections can communicate when they are independent utterances and why they can do so, leaving aside other issues related to their interpretation for future work.

2. The current relevance-theoretic approach to interjections

Wharton's (2000, 2001, 2003) approach to interjections rests squarely on some of the relevance-theoretic concepts and distinctions:

- a) The distinction between *conceptual* and *procedural* meaning, according to which some linguistic expressions encode concepts or representations,

⁵ For obvious space restrictions, in this paper I will not summarise the theoretical postulates of this cognitive pragmatic model. For recent detailed summaries, see Wilson and Sperber (2002, 2004). This does not mean, however, that I will not explain some of its basic notions if necessary.

whilst others encode instructions about how to relate or process chunks of information (e.g. Blakemore 1987; Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber 1993).

- b) The notion of *explicature*, which is the fully propositional form of an utterance recovered after the pragmatic enrichment with contextual material of its *logical form*⁶ obtained from its linguistic decoding (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Carston 2002a; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004).
- c) The distinction between *lower-* and *higher-level explicatures*, the latter being speech-act or propositional-attitude descriptions under which the fully propositional form of an utterance, its lower-level explicature, is embedded (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber 1993).

With his work, he reacts against what he calls the *conceptualist* approach to interjections, represented by Wierzbicka (1991, 1992), Ameka (1992a, 1992b) or Wilkins (1992, 1995), as he finds the following problems:

1. Interjections cannot encode conceptual structures and their meaning cannot be semantically decomposed in the formulas suggested by Wierzbicka (1991, 1992).
2. Those formulas do not capture why the same interjection can express positive and negative feelings in different contexts (Wharton 2003: 46).
3. Interjections are so context-dependent that it seems unlikely that the only contribution of pragmatic factors to their interpretation is the assignment of reference to the elements they index, as Wilkins (1992, 1995) proposes.
4. Interjections seem to be halfway between the natural and the linguistic. Like other paralinguistic elements such as grimaces, gestures or tones of voice, they retain their naturalness and can be used to communicate provided there is an underlying code associated with them.
5. Interjections do not contribute to the truth-conditions of the utterances they accompany.

Wharton (2000, 2001, 2003) proposes that interjections do not have conceptual meaning, but a procedural meaning that helps the hearer recover the higher-level explicatures of the utterance they accompany. As a consequence, they do not contribute to the truth-conditions of the utterance which they accompany. In his own words, interjections encode an instruction which “[...] merely encourages the hearer to embed the proposition expressed under speech-act or propositional-attitude description by constructing higher-level explicatures” (2001: 148). Therefore, he regards interjections as “[...] indicators of higher-level explicatures containing speech-act or propositional-attitude information” (2003: 54).

⁶ In relevance theory, a logical form is a structured set of concepts (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995) or, as Carston (2002b) puts it, a sort of conceptual schema or template.

Accordingly, the presence of the interjections *Huh!* in (3a) and *Wow!* in (4a) may lead a hearer to derive the explicatures in (3b) and (4b), respectively:

- (3) a. BMWs are cheap cars, huh!
b. It is absurd/ridiculous to think that BMWs are cheap cars.
- (4) a. Wow! Your new jacket is cute.
b. The speaker is delighted that the new jacket is cute.

Thus, Wharton accounts for what interjections communicate in those cases in which they occur with another proposition and project an attitude toward that proposition (3). Likewise, his account applies to those cases in which the attitude is projected toward a perceived object (4). However, it poses some problems in those cases in which interjections stand alone as full utterances, without any preceding or following proposition. In such cases, no attitude can be projected toward any embedded propositional content because there is obviously no propositional content to embed. In such cases the author contends that interjections do not convey a higher-level explicature, but a *feeling* or *sensation* with which “[...] the speaker reveals something about her internal state [...] something representational [...]” (Wharton 2003: 57).

Wharton (2003) sees interjections as context-restrictors that “[...] guide the comprehension process by narrowing the hearer’s search space and ‘indicating’ the general direction in which the intended meaning is to be sought” (2003: 58). They contribute to optimal relevance by decreasing the hearer’s processing effort in his interpretation. Interjections encode computational instructions regarding the type of assumptions that a hearer should activate, or the cognitive effects that he may expect in a particular situation (Wharton 2003: 59). Those instructions prompt the hearer to activate different attitudinal concepts or types of concepts (Wharton 2003: 60). Accordingly, an interjection such as *Wow!* activates attitudinal descriptions comprising delight, surprise or excitement: *yuk!* activates an attitudinal description of disgust, and *aha!* another of surprise, etc. Interjections may activate a wide range of possible propositional-attitude descriptions, but the precise one the hearer may operate with depends on the context he selects and his inferential abilities. When interjections are used alone, they may communicate at an implicit level (Wharton 2003: 62).

Wharton’s analysis preserves the assumption that interjections contribute to linguistic communication and have a coded component, but that coded component is not conceptual, but procedural (Wharton 2003: 63). He places interjections along a continuum that ranges from mere *showing* to *saying*. While in cases of showing an individual provides the audience with a relatively direct evidence of what he wants to communicate, in cases of saying that evidence is much less direct. Interjections would be borderline cases (Wharton 2003: 73-76) which, originated as natural responses or reactions, can be used to communicate, provided the hearer

recognises an *informative* and a *communicative* intention in the speaker⁷. They are cases of showing insofar as they are relatively direct evidence of the feeling or sensation that the speaker intends to communicate and the hearer recognises those two intentions in the speaker. They are cases of saying inasmuch as that direct evidence originates as a natural expression of emotion and is subsequently ‘stylised’, so they are coded to some extent. As a consequence of that stylisation, Wharton claims that interjections are coded *signals*, i.e. procedural expressions that have evolved to convey information by “[...] pointing in the direction of the appropriate conceptual representation” (2003: 81).

Finally, concerning the problem of interjections being part of the language, Wharton (2003: 62-67) does not offer a definitive answer. Taking into account their paralinguistic nature, phonological atypicality – which makes it hard in some cases to report them by means of a verb such as ‘say’ – their syntactic peculiarities and morphological non-productivity, he is inclined to state that interjections are not proper linguistic elements. However, since he is aware of their disparateness and heterogeneity, he prefers not to give a final answer that applies to the whole class thereof, but admits that “[...] an adequate account of interjections should reflect this heterogeneity” (Wharton 2003: 66). This seems to imply that we should be ready to admit a sort of gradient with interjections that are much closer to a full linguistic status and others that are distant from it.

As can be seen, Wharton’s analysis of interjections is rather coherent with some of the postulates of the relevance-theoretic pragmatic approach to communication and cognition. In fact, it is made along the same lines as other relevance-theoretic analyses of mood indicators (e.g. Sperber and Wilson, 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004), sentential adverbs (e.g. Ifantidou 1992) or hearsay particles (e.g. Blass 1990; Itani 1998)⁸. However, as anticipated above, it also poses some problems, which I discuss in the next section.

3. Some problems with the current relevance-theoretic approach

⁷ In relevance-theoretic terms, the speaker’s *informative intention* is the set of assumptions that she wants to communicate, and her *communicative intention* is her intention to make manifest her intention to communicate that set of assumptions (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004).

⁸ Wharton’s treatment of interjections as encoders of procedural meaning has been recently followed, for example, by Torres Sánchez (2000), Cueto Vallverdú and López Bobo (2003) or Torres Sánchez and Berbeira Gardón (2003) in order to account for the pragmatics of interjections in Spanish.

To the best of my knowledge, Wharton's (2000, 2001, 2003) proposals have been criticised, somewhat unjustifiably, by Wałaszewska (2004). She thinks that the fact that interjections share some properties with a number of paralinguistic and non-linguistic behaviours that humans use in communication has made Wharton (2000, 2001, 2003) argue that his approach can be extended to those behaviours. This would apparently involve an extension and application of procedural meaning to other linguistic phenomena such as irony, which is quite often induced by those paralinguistic or non-linguistic elements. In turn, this application could lead to an unmotivated revision of the current relevance-theoretic account of irony in terms of echoic use and metarepresentation (Wałaszewska 2004: 124).

Wałaszewska (2004: 124-126) also finds other problems in the current procedural account. On the one hand, if the procedural nature of interjections provokes the activation of attitudinal descriptions – ‘delight’ or ‘surprise’ in the case of *Wow!*, ‘pain’ or ‘sorrow’ in that of *Oh!*, etc. – she considers that “[...] such a claim seems to involve a contradiction in terms” (Wałaszewska 2004: 125), as those descriptions would require a conceptual basis, even if vague or weak. Indeed, as will be seen below, some authors have contended that interjections encode very general concepts. On the other hand, Wałaszewska (2004) argues that the current analysis of interjections as encoders of procedural meaning that contribute to an utterance higher-level explicatures satisfactorily applies to interjections occurring with another utterance or proposition, but certainly poses some other problems when they occur alone, in isolation, constituting utterances on their own. I firmly adhere to her comment that in those cases “[...] it is hard to see what they operate on” (Wałaszewska 2004: 125). Wharton contends that interjections can be pointers, and give a vague or superficial idea of a speaker's emotion, feeling or sensation. But do interjections always communicate in this way? Can we still maintain the assumption that interjections contribute to an utterance higher-level explicatures when they occur with no immediately preceding or following proposition? Can we always preserve the intuition that interjections are context-restrictors? What happens when they occur alone and there is no adjacent utterance? Will the hearer only obtain information about the speaker's attitude when processing them, or can he obtain something else, as other authors claim (e.g. Wilkins 1992, 1995; Wierzbicka 1991, 1992; Vassileva 1994; Wilmet 1997; Światkowska 2006)? If so, how can the hearer obtain that?

Furthermore, Wharton's approach does not seem to work well with the so-called conative or volitive interjections. Speakers do not use this type of interjections to express their feelings or emotions, but their desires and intentions, even if when doing so they may simultaneously reveal their feelings or emotions. In the case of conative/volitive interjections it would be difficult to see how those interjections lead hearers to recover higher-level explicatures that are descriptions of their attitudes or have to do with their feelings. Rather, such explicatures would

be directive speech-act descriptions. On the other hand, conative/volitive interjections are not in many cases appended to other propositions which hearers could embed under speech-act or propositional attitude descriptions, so they would not contribute to higher-level explicatures in those cases.

Bearing these problems in mind, consider the following cases. Firstly, imagine a quite familiar context in which a small boy is about to touch, and probably let fall down, a very expensive crystal vase placed on a shelf. His mother observes this and, in order to prevent him from touching it, shouts (5) or (6):

- (5) Hey!
- (6) Oi!

The interjections in (5) and (6) are conative or volitive, but, more importantly, they are intentionally produced by the mother, whose intention would be to make her son refrain from touching the vase. In this case, we could not admit that the interjections simply point toward some assumptions that the son has to activate in order to understand his mother's feeling or sensation, for she is not certainly expressing any feeling or sensation. Rather, they signal some assumptions that the boy has to use in order to understand that she intends him not to do something. Then, would not we say that the mother communicates to the boy her desire that he should not touch the vase and not just a feeling or emotion? Could not we say that the mother has a very precise informative intention, and that, for communication to succeed in this case, her son must infer that informative intention and recover an implicit proposition regarding her mother's desire from that interjectional utterance? The problem is how and why the son would recover such a proposition. Obviously that would require that he perceived those interjections as intentionally addressed to him and attributed to her mother the intention to get him (not) perform some action.

Consider a second context in which a guy is dating his girlfriend. She has recently been to the hairdresser's and changed her hairstyle. When he meets her, he notices that she looks great with her new hairdo. Instead of explicitly complimenting her new look by means of a compliment formula such as those in (7) he resorts to an interjection (8):

- (7) a. Nice/Cute hairdo!
- b. You look great/wonderful today with that new hairstyle!
- (8) Wow!

In a context like this, the interjection could not make the girlfriend embed a proposition under a propositional-attitude description, for there is no such proposition. As in the previous case, the girlfriend could attribute to her boyfriend the intention not merely to express a feeling of joy, gladness or pleasure when

meeting her or noticing her new look, but also an intention to express something about it (“Your new hairdo is wonderful”), about her (“You look great today”) or about himself (“I (do) like your new hairdo”). In that case, the interjection could make the hearer recover his unexpressed thoughts. But to recover those propositions the girlfriend will have to know what her boyfriend feels, what causes that feeling or what its target is.

Consider now the following cases noted by López Bobo (2002) in which a primary or secondary interjection⁹ appears in utterances of complex sentences replacing one of their clausal constituents. In the first one, two friends are talking about a robbery one of them suffered at home, and he is complaining about it. Imagine he says (9):

(9) If I catch him (the robber), oh my God!

The speaker utters a complex conditional sentence in which the main clause has been replaced by a secondary interjection. From the context of the utterance it may be clear to both interlocutors that that individual’s intention could not just be to express an emotion or feeling. Nor would it be to transmit an attitude to the propositional content of the first clause. He could perfectly intend to communicate something like “I will call the police” or “I will not let him go”, i.e. some thoughts that she does not (want to) verbalise or for which she cannot find the appropriate words and expects the hearer to infer. But for the hearer to recover those propositions, he would need to know which specific feeling the speaker is expressing, what provokes it or to what it is targeted, and which implications having such feeling may have in a person like his interlocutor. Along the same lines, imagine a second case in which two close friends are talking about a rather beautiful girl, probably because one of them likes her a lot. Suppose that individual utters (10), with a sigh in the middle of his utterance:

(10) She is so beautiful that...oh!

In this case, the speaker has resorted to a result clause, but instead of explicitly mentioning that subordinate clause, he has substituted it for by an interjection. As in the previous case, the hearer could recover the missing clause using contextual

⁹ Those monomorphemic interjections that are not homophonous or homonymous with other words, constitute independent, non-elliptical utterances by themselves and do not co-occur with other word classes are normally referred to as *primary* interjections (Wierzbicka 1991: 280, 1992: 161-163; Ameka 1992a: 105-106, 2006: 744), whilst those interjections that are words transferred from other lexical categories, have an independent semantic value but are used as non-elliptical utterances by themselves to express a mental attitude or state are alluded to as *secondary* interjections.

information and attribute to the speaker the intention to implicitly communicate something like “I like/love her”, “I have fallen in love with her” or “I would very much like to marry her” as a result of his expressing a feeling that is originated by or targeted to a person or some facts, events or states of affairs, etc.

As we can see, these examples involve some problems which the current relevance-theoretic approach to interjections does not address. In cases like these speakers can use interjections in order to intentionally make manifest that they have a rather specific informative intention which, even if they do not put it into words, hearers can infer by resorting to contextual information. While the speaker’s informative intention when using emotive/expressive interjections can be to express that she has a certain feeling or experiences a particular emotion that is caused by or targeted to some object, person, fact, event or state of affairs, in the case of conative/volitive interjections the speaker may intend to communicate a rather specific order which the hearer can infer if he attributes to her the intention to issue it as addressed to him and what she intends him (not) to do. If hearers recover what originates their interlocutor’s feeling or what it is targeted to, or what their interlocutor intends them (not) to do, interjections may prompt hearers to recover propositions that they may think correspond to their interlocutors’ informative intention. This possibility may arise, in my opinion, as a result of some of the features of interjections, which I summarise in the next section.

4. Interjections, indexicality and conventionalisation

Wilkins (1992, 1995) argues that, although interjectional utterances do not have a sentential, clausal or phrasal structure, they can be used to transmit propositional contents because of two of their features: their conventionalisation and indexical nature. Regarding the former, as a consequence of their repeated usage in (a) certain circumstance(s) (e.g. after having observed that an individual gets his finger hit), some interjections (e.g. “Ow!” or “Oh!”) may be directly connected with a specific meaning (e.g. a feeling of pain). That meaning may subsequently stabilise (Wilkins 1992: 148; Schourup 2001: 1045). In effect, the conventionalisation of interjections in some contexts is further supported by the fact that they cannot be freely replaced by others in those same contexts (Schourup 2001: 1044). For instance, after a brilliant performance, it is rather unlikely that the audience shouts *alas!* or *yuk!*

On the other hand, Wilkins believes that interjections have underlying referential or deictic components which enable them to “[...] directly index entities in the extralinguistic context as fillers of the argument position in the proposition underlying [them] [...]” (1992: 132). Nevertheless, they differ from other deictic elements for which the hearer must only find a referent in that they subcategorise

argument positions containing deictic elements which must be contextually saturated, which enables them to transmit propositions. Accordingly, emotive/expressive interjections such as “Ah!” or “Oh!” would respectively give access to a concept such as SURPRISE or DISAPPOINTMENT and a very general propositional schema such as “I feel X” with a slot for a first person singular subject (Wierzbicka 1991, 1992). In turn, calls of alert such as “Psst!” or “Eh!” would also index a second person object (Wilkins 1995: 370-371). According to Wilkins (1992, 1995), interjections contain a character which encourage the hearer to look for the referents of those deictic elements, which the hearer must recover using his inferential abilities. He also proposes to consider them as exclamations.

In the same vein, in her study of French interjections, Vassileva (1994: 107) argues that conative/volitive interjections are orders that point towards a very specific action that the speaker wants the hearer, subcategorised as an object by the interjection, (not) to do:

- (11) Chut! / Tst! ORDER/INJUNCTION [YOU, BE QUIET]
 - (12) Eh!/Hé!/Ohé! ORDER/INJUNCTION [YOU, ESTABLISH CONTACT]
 - (13) Assez!/Barca! ORDER/INJUNCTION [YOU, STOP DOING SOMETHING]
- (adapted from Vassileva 1994)

Along the same lines, Vázquez Veiga and Alonso Ramos (2004) have more recently suggested that interjections have a core semantic component, which amounts to a concept related to the frequent stable senses with which they are customarily used, an utterer- and an interlocutor-component, and a Q-component, which refers to a proposition that in some cases can be elided (14), while in others it can surface and have a syntactic form (15), for, as Nicoloff (1990: 216) illustrates, some interjections can have complementation:

- (14) a. ¡Ojo! [Watch out!]
- b. Hurrah!
- c. Oh!
- (15) a. ¡Ojo con el escalón! [Mind the step!]
- b. Hurrah for Manchester United!
- c. Oh for a drink!

Although some authors (Torres Sánchez 2000; Cueto Vallverdú and López Bobo 2003: 25-26) do not take interjections to be sentential or propositional utterances that have a predicative dimension, state or deny anything or have truth-conditions, the works by Wilkins (1992, 1995), Vassileva (1994) and Vázquez Veiga and Alonso Ramos (2004) seem to support the idea that interjections can be *phrase-words* (Bres 1995), *implicated predications*, *condensed phrases* (Wilmet 1997), or *acts of non-phasal predication* (Światkowska 2006). In any case, what is important is that some interjections – namely, lexicalised ones – can be “[...] used

intentionally, or even deceptively [...] in conjunction with specific contextual assumptions to convey propositions [...] but [...] they do not themselves linguistically encode propositions” (Schourup 2001: 1045). They can only acquire a fully propositional content by reference to preceding or following discourse, acts, behaviours, states of affairs or objects in a specific context (Barb ris 1995; Światkowska 2006: 54), but in them “[...] the contribution of grammar to the communicative process reaches its minimum” (Quirk et al. 1985: 88). The indexical nature of interjections should not necessarily imply that they contain indexical elements such as ‘I’, ‘you’ or ‘here’, but rather “[...] that the meaning of an interjection is underspecified with regard to the particular situational constellation in which it is used (who the speaker is, who the hearer is, the relationship between them, what has come before, etc.)” (Aijmer 2004: 104).

If, as has been seen so far, interjections can be used to convey specific propositions, a complete relevance-theoretic account must be able to explain the reasons why they can do so and the hearer can recover those propositions, the way in which he does so, as well as the factors or the cognitive abilities on which he must rely. For space reasons, I will only address in this paper why and how the speaker can be taken to communicate propositions by means of interjectional utterances, and leave for a future work some consideration about why and how the hearer can recover those propositions. In my opinion, their conventionalised and indexical nature can help us understand their *semantic potential* (R canati 2004), so the approach that I will propose in this paper is partly based on those two features. I would not like to deny the validity and explanatory power of the current account, as it can be perfectly maintained that interjections in some cases contribute to the higher-level explicatures of the utterances they accompany and in other cases encourage the hearer to form a representation of the speaker’s feeling(s) or emotion(s). However, on the light of the previous examples and works, I would like to explore an additional possibility: namely, that in those cases in which interjections occur alone as full utterances, they can also prompt hearers to recover propositions.

5. An alternative relevance-theoretic proposal

Some of the conceptualists’ assumptions do not seem to be on the wrong track. In fact, their works show that, even if interjections do not have specifiable, definite and constant conceptual contents as verbs, nouns or adjectives do, some of them can communicate in some contexts something that can be explicated in propositional terms. But, how can they communicate it? And why can they communicate it? These are just some questions that a relevance-theoretic approach to interjections must answer.

The conventionalisation of interjections must certainly play a crucial role in their production and interpretation. In relevance-theoretic terms conventionalisation is understood as the availability of encyclopaedic assumptions regarding the usage of certain expressions, their frequent contexts of occurrence or their possible meanings (Nicolle and Clark 1998; Žegarac 1998)¹⁰. This implies that individuals must possess some encyclopaedic knowledge about the potential meanings or senses of interjections in very particular situations, about whether they can be used to express feelings and emotions or orders and intentions, and even which of them. That knowledge, which could vary from individual to individual just in the same way as the interjections used to express feelings or orders may vary across different communities or groups of speakers, would interact with the individuals' perception of the communicative context and provide them with a more or less wide range of differing *salient* meanings (e.g. Giora 1997) which interjections may have in that context. Following Récanati's (2004) *meaning eliminativism*, the sense or meaning that an interjection can be thought to have in a particular circumstance would then highly depend on a relation between its use in that situation and the knowledge that individuals have about its use in similar past situations with a similar, if not identical, intended meaning.

The repeated intentional uses of an interjection allow for the possibility of its conventionalisation with a sense in certain communicative situations and makes that intended sense, stored in the minds of (a group of) speakers of a language, highly accessible or predictable in future uses. If the interjection is repeatedly used over history in a specific (set of) context(s) with a particular intended sense, that sense can be so narrowly connected with it that the interjection can gradually become grammaticalised with it. As a result of their grammaticalisation, there could even be a sort of underlying 'code' stemming precisely from the repeated or customary usages of some interjections in very specific situations. It could even be reasonable to think that individuals could know that a particular set of interjections – emotive/expressive interjections – is normally resorted to so as to express feelings or emotions, while another set of interjections – conative/volitive interjections – is used to transmit intentions or orders. Hence, individuals could associate them with a very general, primitive and vague concept: FEELING in the case of emotive/expressive interjections, ORDER in the case of conative/volitive interjections. If there were interjections used only to express a very specific type of emotion or feeling (e.g. happiness), their meaning potential would be much more restricted and individuals might even associate those interjections with a more

¹⁰ Conventionalisation is similar to *standardisation* in that these two processes involve a connection of linguistic expressions with encyclopaedic assumptions about their usage and contexts of occurrence, but differs from it in that standardised expressions have and retain a linguistic content which allows them to be used as a vehicle to communicate the speaker's informative intention in other contexts.

specific concept which could be subsumed by the general concept linked to their category (e.g. HAPPINESS). In turn, that more specific concept could subsume other more specific related concepts (e.g. EUPHORIA). When processing interjectional utterances, hearers would have to activate such concepts so as to understand what their interlocutor intends to express.

Interjections do not communicate propositions in the standard way other types of sentential, clausal or phrasal utterances do, for interjectional utterances cannot be strictly said to encode sentences, clauses or phrases. Nor could they be said to encode a sort of propositional template or some sort of basic syntactic structure, as could be assumed from some of the conceptualists' proposals. They do not have an ordered surface structure in which syntactic constituents can be easily identified. However, they could encode some procedures that may make the hearer recover some information that is essential to understand what the speaker intends to communicate with them in a particular context.

As a result of a speaker having a specific informative intention, she can resort to a linguistically encoded sentential utterance to make manifest that intention. Obviously, verbal communication based on the usage of linguistically encoded utterances, risky though it may be, is possibly one of the best ways for the speaker to make the hearer know that intention. When the hearer processes a linguistically encoded utterance, he decodes it sequentially and, based on his grammatical knowledge, obtains its logical form, which he must then pragmatically enrich (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004). Since syntactic constituents cannot be distinguished in interjectional utterances, they cannot be said to be properly decoded, so their processing cannot yield a logical form in the same way as the linguistic decoding of other utterances does. If so, how can the hearer process them?

Although interjections do not encode a logical form in the same way as other sentential, clausal or phrasal utterances do, the examples above (5-10) suggest that, even if those interjections could be perfectly interpreted as spontaneous, involuntary or unconscious reactions to certain behaviours, states of affairs, objects, etc., given the adequate facial expressions, paralinguistic gestures or tones of voice or pitch – indeed, Quirk et al. (1985: 853) explain that many interjections are associated with concrete phonological features, such as extra lengthening and wide pitch range – their speakers could also be perfectly attributed a very specific informative intention, i.e. they could be willing to communicate something very specific which, even if not explicitly communicated in the relevance-theoretic sense (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004), can be explicated in terms of propositions or predications. In cases like those in which interjections are intentionally produced, they could procedurally encourage the hearer to access some contextual elements, such as objects, events, actions, states of affairs, propositions or manifest assumptions, to which they are projected or

targeted. Accordingly, emotive/expressive interjections could encourage the hearer to look for a contextual element that originates the feeling that the speaker expresses or is the target of that feeling. On the contrary, conative/volitive interjections could make the hearer look for contextual elements that constitute what the speaker intends the hearer (not) to do. Those contextual elements, together with the feeling or order that the hearer can associate with a particular interjection, would be the coordinates the hearer will need to construct some sort of very schematic proposition that would capture the speaker's feelings or desires. That very schematic proposition can in turn be exploited by the hearer so as to derive further implicatures, whose weakness or strength will depend on the amount of further contextual information required.

With an emotive/expressive interjection the speaker expresses that she feels something towards or because of some contextual element, while with a conative/volitive interjection she expresses that she wants someone (not) to do some action. By means of interjections the speaker tries to make the hearer attribute to her some feelings or desires. In fact, if asked what they meant by means of an interjectional utterance, the speakers might be able to paraphrase it as a sentential, clausal or phrasal utterance. Likewise, if the hearers of those interjections were asked what they think their interlocutors might have meant with them, they could probably say that speakers' intention was very specific and manage to put it into words, even if the proposition that they construct may not be an exact reduplication of the one that the speaker could have thought of or that proposition could significantly differ from it. Nonetheless, both the speaker and the hearer could probably recognise and identify an underlying proposition in an interjectional utterance, which actually constitutes the speaker's informative intention. This can be possible because interjections are intentionally produced in a rather specific context, in a way that resembles other previous usages, and can point to some contextual elements that the hearer must access in order to understand the speaker's informative intention. Individuals can use interjections as the (imperfect) vehicle to make manifest their informative intention because, when pragmatically enriched with the contextual information manifest to individuals and their encyclopaedic information about what interjections can be used to communicate in certain circumstances, hearers can infer a wide range of propositions. But how can the speaker be certain that the hearer will recover what she intends to communicate by means of an interjectional utterance? As has been pointed out, interjections can be considered exclamative utterances (Wilkins 1992, 1995). This proposal opens a path that is worth exploring. If there is a type of interjections that can be regarded as exclamative utterances that is the class of emotive/expressive interjections. Conative/volitive interjections would be cases of imperative utterances.

One of the most significant contributions of relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004) has been the analysis of exclamative sentences as cases of *non-attributive metarepresentations* of desirable thoughts, propositions or information in general (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson 1999; Wilson and Sperber 1988, 2002, 2004). If we concede emotive/expressive interjections the status of exclamative sentences, and, in effect, they share with these suprasegmental or prosodic features such as tones and contours, then with an emotive/expressive interjectional utterance the speaker can metarepresent a non-verbalised thought or proposition that she expects and intends the hearer to entertain in a certain communicative situation. In other words, due to their procedural nature, interjections can be used to transmit in some cases an extremely incomplete, rather schematic or condensed thought or proposition, which the speaker expects and intends the hearer to entertain by relying on the contextual elements they signal and the encyclopaedic information about them. Accordingly, the relevance of emotive/expressive interjections lies on the fact that the speaker encourages the hearer to entertain such thought or proposition using encyclopaedic information about their senses, contexts of occurrence and the contextual elements that they point. By doing so, the hearer can obtain a proposition that can result in cognitive effects.

On the other hand, imperative sentences in relevance theory have been analysed as cases of non-attributive metarepresentations of desirable states of affairs (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004). Conative/volitive interjections signal or point some state of affairs and metarepresent it as desirable from the speaker's point of view. Accordingly, their relevance resides in the fact that the speaker encourages the hearer to discover the state of affairs she points by means of them, what she expects from him or what she intends him (not) to do.

To illustrate this, consider the case of two individuals who meet in a street and one of them produces an emotive/expressive interjection such as (16), with both a precise informative intention and a communicative intention. Due to the role of interjections as context-restrictors that activate certain assumptions, the hearer may activate assumptions such as those in (17):

(16) Yippee!

(17) a. I have met my friend John. [*Contextual assumption*]

b. I have not met him for a long time. [*Contextual assumption*]

c. It is (always) pleasing to meet an old/good friend. [*Encyclopaedic assumption*]

d. When someone meets an old/good friend, s/he may be happy. [*Encyclopaedic assumption*]

e. When someone meets an old/good friend, s/he shows his/er happiness. [*Encyclopaedic assumption*]

f. "Yippee!" expresses happiness for something. [*Encyclopaedic assumption*]

In this context, the speaker may have spontaneously or involuntarily expressed a feeling of happiness or pleasure, but she may also have the informative intention to make manifest to the hearer that the feeling of happiness or pleasure that she experiences is motivated by or targeted to her meeting him. Although (16) does not have a surface sentential or phrasal structure, it is a conventionalised interjection. Owing to its conventionalised nature, the hearer will find in his encyclopaedic knowledge information about the possible feelings that the speaker may intend to express with that interjection in different situations and in this particular one. The interjection, furthermore, signals some contextual elements that the hearer will have to access in order to infer his interlocutor's informative intention. In this example the contextual element that causes the feeling expressed or to which that feeling is targeted is the encounter. The hearer may think that the speaker has intended to make manifest to him some or all of the assumptions he might have activated, and, therefore, that they may be part of her informative intention, so he will have to determine which of them actually constitute her informative intention. In this case, he will have to determine which contextual element causes the speaker's feeling or to what it is targeted. If he does this correctly, he will infer a proposition like (18), whose weakness or strength will depend on the amount of inference and contextual information the hearer needs:

(18) The speaker_x is happy/glad/pleased/exultant_z at time_t because she_x has met me_y at time_u.

In the example discussed above in which the small boy is about to touch the crystal vase and his mother produces an interjection such as (5) or (6), repeated here as (19), the interjection could make the son activate any of the contextual assumptions in (20), but would signal some event or state of affairs, in this case the more than likely touching of the expensive and fragile crystal vase (20c). With that signalled contextual element and the encyclopaedic information that the interjection is normally used to issue orders (21), the son could infer that his mother is expressing an order that has to do with that state of affairs, i.e. that she thinks it desirable that he did not touch the vase in question. From this, he could infer any of the propositions in (22):

(19) Hey!/Oi!

(20) a. That vase is made of crystal. [*Contextual assumption*]

b. Crystal vases are fragile and can easily break into pieces if they fall down. [*Encyclopaedic assumption*]

c. My mother has seen that I am about to touch it. [*Contextual assumption*]

(21) People normally shout "Hey!/Oi!" when they want someone (not) to do something. [*Encyclopaedic assumption*]

- (22) a. Don't touch it/that (vase)!
- b. I don't want you to touch that vase!
- c. Leave that vase!
- d. I order you not to touch that vase.

Finally, when the guy's girlfriend appears with a new hairdo and he utters an expressive interjection such as (8), repeated here as (23), the girlfriend could be encouraged to infer a proposition similar to those in (26) as a result of her accessing contextual assumptions like those in (24) and encyclopaedic information about that interjection (25). That proposition could additionally make the hearer derive assumptions like those in (26) as cognitive effects:

- (23) Wow!
- (24) a. I have changed my hairdo.
- b. My new hairdo is cute.
- c. My new hairdo makes me look more elegant/fashionable/beautiful.
- d. I like my new hairdo.
- e. This is the type of hairdos my boyfriend likes.
- (25) People normally say "Wow!" to show their admiration/approval of or surprise at something they have just seen/noticed/realised, etc.
- (26) a. My boyfriend likes my (new) hairdo.
- b. My boyfriend adores my (new) hairdo.
- c. My boyfriend is surprised by my new look.
- d. My boyfriend is amazed by my new look.
- e. My boyfriend approves of my new hairdo.
- (27) a. I look great with this hairdo.
- b. My new hairdo is cute.
- c. My boyfriend indeed loves/adores/admires my new aspect.
- d. The hairdresser has done a great job.
- e. I will go back to that hairdresser's in the future.

In cases like these, an interjection that is (highly) conventionalised in a specific context procedurally leads the hearer to resort to some contextual information that helps him infer the speaker's informative intention. What the speaker does when producing emotive/expressive interjections is to metarepresent a thought which she expects or intends the hearer to entertain, while she presents a state of affairs as desirable when she resorts to a conative/volitive interjection. With both types of interjections, the speaker points toward some contextual element that she expects and intends the hearer to activate and use so as to derive propositions that may help him grasp her informative intention and from which he may obtain additional cognitive effects.

The proposal outlined here could also account for those cases noted by López Bobo (2002), repeated below as (28-32). In them, speakers replace a clause in a complex sentential structure by emotive/expressive interjections. By means of

those interjections, speakers encourage their interlocutors to access the contextual material pointed, and to which a certain feeling is targeted, in order to recover implicatures that could be part of their informative intention:

- a) Complex sentences in which an interjection replaces a main clause, as in some conditional sentences:

(28) If I catch him (the robber)... oh my God!

(29) If he reads relevance theory... wow!

- b) Complex sentences in which an interjection replaces a subordinate clause, such as a result clause (30, 31) or a comparative clause (32):

(30) I am so tired that... oh my God!

(31) It is so good that... dam it!

(32) Mary is more intelligent than... hell!

In (28) the speaker may encourage the hearer to derive implicatures such as “My interlocutor will call the police” or “She will not let the robber go” as a result of projecting a certain feeling (e.g. wrath, anger, annoyance, vengeance, etc.) towards some hypothetical subsequent event or state of affairs that would obtain if the speaker caught the robber. That event or state of affairs would become manifest as a result of activating a mental frame or scenario related to the potential consequences that catching a robber might have or the subsequent reaction that someone may have. In turn, when processing (29) the hearer may be led to derive implicatures such as “I will be (positively) surprised/amazed”, “He will understand things much better” or “He will get a much broader view of pragmatics”, if he perceives that the speaker has projected a specific feeling (e.g. amazement, surprise, approval, unexpectedness, etc.) towards some virtual subsequent outcome that reading the theory in question may have. Assumptions related to that outcome may be manifest to both interlocutors as a consequence of accessing a mental scenario about the implications that reading some scientific work may have.

When processing (30) the hearer may understand that the speaker signals some potential or predictable consequence that her being so tired may make manifest to the hearer and expresses a feeling toward one or some of those manifest consequences. Therefore, he could infer propositions such as “My interlocutor will go to bed right now”, “My interlocutor wants to sleep”, “My interlocutors is (very much) looking forward to going to bed” or “My interlocutor cannot work any longer/do anything else”. In a context in which it is mutually manifest to the interlocutors that they have tried an excellent meal at a very trendy but expensive restaurant, when hearing (31) the hearer could perceive that the speaker expresses some feeling toward a potential consequence that the meal being excellent but expensive may have. If it is manifest to the hearer that the speaker has certainly

enjoyed it, it might be manifest to him that the speaker would not probably mind having lunch at that restaurant again or ordering the same meal in spite of its high price, or that she would not mind recommending the restaurant or the meal to her friends even if it is a bit expensive. Consequently, the hearer could infer implicatures such as “I do not care/mind (paying so much money for it)” or “My interlocutor would like to try/would not mind ordering this meal again in spite of the price” or “My interlocutor will recommend this meal to her friends (in spite of its price)”. Finally, in a context in which it is manifest to the hearer that the speaker feels envy or disappointment, does not like Mary or regrets that Mary is so intelligent a girl, he may understand that with the interjection in (32) she signals a set of potential individuals whose intelligence Mary’s is compared to and projects a specific feeling towards the fact that Mary may be more intelligent than those individuals. As a consequence, the hearer may derive implicatures such as “My interlocutor is disappointed by the fact that Peter is less intelligent than Mary” or “My interlocutor is angry by the fact that Mary is more intelligent than any other student in the class”.

If linguistically encoded communication is an intrinsically risky activity that can give rise to many misunderstandings and even completely fail, in the interpretation of interjectional utterances those risks and the probability of failure significantly increase because interjectional utterances do not have the syntactic surface structure characteristic of other utterances which, though not guaranteeing the success in communication, considerably facilitate it. If, as has been put forward in this paper, hearers can infer propositions from interjectional utterances as a consequence of their procedurally signalling some contextual elements which originate a feeling or emotion or towards which a feeling, emotion or order is targeted, one of the questions that must be answered is how hearers can infer those propositions. This certainly requires an explanation that addresses not only the linguistic properties of interjections, but also the cognitive abilities that hearers must have and work with in their interpretation. However, as mentioned above, I will leave that issue for future work.

6. Conclusion

As stated above, the aim of this paper was not to deny the validity and explanatory power of Wharton’s (2000, 2001, 2003) current approach, as it can be maintained that hearers may exploit interjections in order to construct the higher-level explicatures of utterances. Rather, its purpose has been to suggest an alternative, more general framework that can be applied to some linguistic contexts in which interjections may appear so as to account for their meaning potential. In doing so, it has taken into account some of the theoretical tools and latest

developments of relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004) and previous work on interjections. Although the approach to interjections presented in this paper also considers that interjections do not encode very stable, constant or specific conceptual contents, it shares with the so-called conceptualist approach the treatment of interjections as indexical elements that may be used to point to contextual material that the hearer needs in order to understand the speaker's informative intention when producing an interjectional utterance. This paper has suggested to extend the relevance-theoretic analysis of exclamative utterances to emotive/expressive interjections and, accordingly, to treat them as cases of utterances that encourage the hearer to construct a certain fragmentary or schematic proposition – which the speaker does not communicate by means of a sentential, clausal or phrasal utterance – as a result of their signalling some contextual element that causes the speaker a particular feeling or towards which the speaker projects that feeling. On the other hand, this paper has proposed to consider conative/volitive interjections as cases of imperative utterances with which the speaker points to some object, state of affairs, event, action, etc. which the hearer must access so as to infer which state of affairs the speaker presents as desirable from her own point of view.

Some readers may wonder whether the approach here presented would imply a complete rejection of Wharton's (2000, 2001, 2003) current account of interjections, or how his and this account can be reconciled. This account agrees with Wharton's in the belief that interjections are procedural elements. However, the picture Wharton's offers is a little bit restrictive because it only focuses on two usages of interjections, limits the procedures encoded by interjections to the recovery of higher-level explicatures, and does not consider contexts in which they can be taken to be the (imperfect) linguistic means individuals may intentionally resort to so as to communicate non-verbalised beliefs, feelings, desires and intentions that can be assigned a propositional form. For this reason, the account here presented should be understood as suggesting that interjections encode different procedures and their procedural meaning can therefore induce hearers to discover which contextual elements (objects, events, states of affairs, actions, assumptions, propositions, etc.) interjections signal, since it is those elements that originate the feeling the speaker expresses, are its target or have something to do with the state of affairs that she presents as desirable. This should not exclude the possibility that speakers exploit interjections to communicate information about their feelings or emotions and hearers take them into account in order to recover that information when building the higher-level explicatures of utterances in those cases in which interjections are appended or juxtaposed to other utterances or propositions.

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