

TEACHING INTERJECTIONS IN THE ESL/EFL CLASS: A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

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1. Introduction

Under the label of interjections linguists have gathered words that express emotions, as in (1) below, words and expressions used to carry out some conversational routines (2), swear words and imprecations (3), attention-getting signals (4), some particles and response words (5), words directed at animals (6), and, probably, onomatopoeias (7) (Wierzbicka 1991: 290, 1992: 194; Ameka 2006: 743):

- (1) Yuk! Ugh! Phew!
- (2) Hello! Thank you! Good bye!
- (3) Shit! Bastard! Hell!
- (4) Hey! Pss! Eh!
- (5) Yes! No!
- (6) Whoa!
- (7) Hehe!

Traditionally, interjections have been considered to be paralinguistic elements because of their phonological and morphological anomalies, lack of denotative meaning and relative syntactic independence (e.g. Quirk et al. 1985; Nicoloff 1990; Wierzbicka 1991, 1992; Ameka 1992, 2006; Bres 1995; López Bobo 2002; Światkowska 2007; Aijmer 2004). This consideration might be the reason why they are paid little attention in ESL/EFL classes. In fact, some teaching materials only deal with their role as *conversation fillers* or *back-channelling devices*. Assuming that interjections deserve more attention, this paper will suggest approaching them in the ESL/EFL class and adopting a pragmatic perspective in order to make students aware of other types and functions of interjections, as well as of their contribution to communication.

2. Interjections in teaching materials

If one has a look at the available ESL materials for beginner and elementary levels, it can be seen that interjections are not included among the initial grammatical or lexical issues to be dealt with (e.g. le Maistre and Lewis 2002; Jones and Goldstein 2005; Redston and Cunningham 2005a; Clandfield 2006, 2007; Scrivener and Sayer 2006). The same situation can be attested at the pre-intermediate upper-intermediate and advanced levels, although at these levels students are certainly exposed to the interjections occurring in listening materials and in their teachers' discourse (cfr. Clare and Wilson 2002; Cunningham and Mohamed 2002; Goldstein 2005; Redston and Cunningham 2005b; Scrivener 2005; Kay et al. 2006; Kerr 2006; Maggs and Quintana 2006; Kerr and Jones 2007; Redston and Cunningham 2007; Scrivener and Bingham 2007; Norris 2008). At the upper-intermediate and advanced levels, furthermore, the lack of attention to interjections can be motivated by a more necessary emphasis on other grammatical, lexical or textual issues. At the intermediate level, however, some materials (e.g. Kerr and Jones 2006; Scrivener and Bingham 2006) include interjections among their syllabi, although they address them under the rubric of *conversation fillers* to express agreement (8), surprise (9) or understanding (10):

- (8) Yeah! Uh-huh! Alright!
- (9) Ah! Oh! My goodness! Really!
- (10) Mm! OK! Alright!

By doing so, those materials stress the importance that becoming a competent listener has when learning English as an SL/FL. Indeed, students must be conscious that, as listeners, they have a very active role in interaction because they bear the responsibility of interpreting messages and contributing to the avoidance of misunderstandings by showing that they do or do not understand what their interlocutors say (Garcés Conejos and Bou Franch 2002). Interjections used as *affect-neutral minimal responses* ('mm!', 'uh-huh!', 'yeah!') or *supportive minimal responses* with which students

can express an increase in degree of involvement with their interlocutors (Stubbe 1998) are certainly crucial when interacting in the L2 because they fulfil three essential functions (Garcés Conejos and Bou Franch 2002: 91-92):

- a) A *cognitive* function, in that the hearer shows the speaker that he is processing what she says.
- b) A *social* function, as interjections signal involvement, affect or interest.
- c) A *discourse-regulatory* function because they ratify the assignment of speaker- and hearer- roles and contribute to the shaping of discourse.

In spite of this treatment of interjections, neither teachers nor students are provided with much information about them. What can be normally found in those materials are lists of additional conversation fillers that teachers can tell students. This may be due to the belief that conversation fillers are similar in the students' L1 and L2, so they facilitate positive transfer into the L2. However, in many cases this is not so, and students must be alerted of differences and peculiarities of interjections in their L1 and L2 (Aijmer 2004). Moreover, the role of interjections in communication must not be limited to the fulfilment of these three functions. Students must know that there are different types of interjections, but, more importantly, that some of them are used to express emotions and as directives.

3. Types of interjections

Some pragmatists have classified interjections adopting functional criteria. For instance, Wierzbicka (1991: 291, 1992: 165) sorts interjections into *emotive*, which have the underlying semantic content "I feel X" and express a range of emotions such as disgust (14), surprise (15), or pain or sorrow (16); *volitive*, which have the semantic content "I want X" and can be addressed to persons (17) or animals (18); and *cognitive*, which have the semantic content "I think X" or "I believe X" and express amazement or success toward something the speaker discovers (19).

- (11) Yuk! Phew!
- (12) Wow! Oops!
- (13) Ouch!
- (14) Sh!
- (15) Pst!
- (16) Aha! Oh!

Along similar lines, Ameka (1992: 113, 2006: 744-745) differentiates between *expressive* interjections, which subsume Wierzbicka's (1991, 1992) emotive and cognitive interjections; *conative* interjections, which correspond to volitive interjections, and *phatic* interjections, which are those used to establish or maintain the interactive contact. Conative or volitive interjections correspond to what Montes calls *projective* interjections in her taxonomy, as "[...] they signal or point to an object or event in the context, or to an utterance in the immediate discourse" (1999: 1296). On the contrary, emotive or expressive interjections correspond to *subjective* interjections, which draw the hearer's attention towards a reaction by the speaker, who has noticed something that has affected her physically or emotionally. Conversation fillers would be clear examples of phatic interjections¹.

¹ Other classifications of interjections are, for instance, those made by Almela (1985), who differentiates interjections of *judgement*, *fulfilment*, *compromise*, *behaviour* and *argumentation*, and Alcaide Lara (1996), who differentiates between *expressive* interjections, which convey the speaker's attitude toward what surrounds her and what other people say, and *appealing* interjections, which are targeted to the hearer in order to draw his attention, warn him of something, make him do something, etc ("eh!", "come on!"). Expressive interjections are further subdivided into (i) *emotive* interjections, which show the speaker's emotions ("bah!", "ah!", "oh my God!", etc.); (ii) *interjections of assessment*, which involve the speaker's comment on the surrounding reality, and may cast a doubt ("pss!", "ah!") or a (positive or negative) evaluation ("gorgeous!", "dam it!", "fuck!"); (iii) *optative* interjections, which can have an expressive or appealing modal value ("holy crab!"), and (iv) *onomatopoeic expressive* interjections.

Authors make slightly different classifications depending on the specific criteria they rely on. Their classifications have the advantage of reflecting and helping ESL/EFL students grasp the many expressive shades and communicative values that interjections can have. However, what students may need to know is how interjections contribute to communication and where their interactive importance lies. Within the cognitive pragmatic framework of relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2004), Wharton (2000, 2001, 2003) has attempted to answer these questions.

4. How interjections contribute to communication

Assuming that the result of the decoding of utterances is a *logical form*² that must be pragmatically enriched until it becomes a fully propositional form or, in the relevance-theoretic terminology, the *explicature* of the utterance, and that the hearer further embeds that explicature under a propositional-attitude or a speech-act description thus obtaining its *higher-level explicature* (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2004), Wharton (2000, 2001, 2003) has suggested that interjections contribute to communication by guiding the hearer in the recovery of the higher-level explicatures of utterances. Interjections encode a procedural meaning which makes hearers embed the proposition that an utterance expresses under a speech-act or propositional-attitude description by constructing higher-level explicatures (Wharton 2001: 148, 2003: 54). Accordingly, the interjections ‘huh!’ and ‘wow!’ in (17a) and (18a) encourage their hearers to derive the explicatures in (17b) and (18b), respectively:

- (17) a. Peter is a nice guy, huh!
b. It is absurd/ridiculous/stupid to think that Peter is a nice guy.
- (18) a. Wow! I have won €1000 in the lottery!
b. The speaker is delighted/pleased/happy that he has won €1000 in the lottery.

This account satisfactorily applies to those cases in which interjections are appended or juxtaposed to a proposition and project an attitude towards that proposition, and in those cases in which, although there is no immediate proposition, there is a perceptible stimulus towards which an attitude is projected. However, there are plenty of cases in which interjections appear alone, as full utterances, and there is no adjacent proposition. In them, interjections would not guide hearers in the recovery of propositional-attitude descriptions, for no proposition could be embedded under such a description. Therefore, what interjections contribute is “[...] something representational [...]”, a *feeling* or *emotion* with which the speaker “[...] reveals something about her internal state” (Wharton 2003: 57).

Since interjections lack conceptual meaning, when they appear alone their procedural meaning leads the hearer to activate different attitudinal concepts (Wharton 2003: 60). For instance, an interjection such as ‘wow!’ makes the hearer activate concepts including DELIGHT, SURPRISE or EXCITEMENT; while ‘yuk!’ encourages the hearer to activate a concept of DISGUST, etc. Their procedural meaning, moreover, directs the hearer to activate some contextual assumptions and to expect some cognitive effects in each situation (Wharton 2003: 59). For that reason, interjections behave as context-restrictors that indicate “[...] the general direction in which the intended meaning is to be sought” (Wharton 2003: 58). Accordingly, in a context in which a girl is served a dish of soup, tastes it and utters (19), the hearer would have to activate assumptions such as those in (20) to understand that the girl is expressing a feeling of disgust:

- (19) Yuk!
- (20) a. Susan has been served a dish of soup.
b. The soup looks horrible.
c. Susan has tried the soup.
d. There is a strange grimace on her face.
e. People often shout “yuk!” when they do not like something.
f. Susan might not like the soup.

² A logical form is a structured set of concepts (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995).

Although the same interjection can potentially activate a wide range of possible propositional-attitude descriptions or attitudinal concepts, the exact one that the hearer will activate will depend on the context he selects to process an interjectional utterance.

Wharton's account of interjections is a good initial starting point to account for their contribution to communication. However, there are many occasions in which interjections occur alone, without any adjacent proposition, and they cannot be said to transmit the speaker's feeling or emotion. The question that now arises is whether they only contribute to communication in the way explained by Wharton.

5. Adopting an alternative pragmatic perspective

Students must be aware that speakers use calls of alerts and other conative or volitive interjections to communicate something very precise. For communication to succeed in those cases, hearers must (i) realise that those interjections are intentionally produced and (ii) infer what their speakers intend to communicate, which is not verbalised or communicated by means of phrasal, clausal or sentential utterances. Those examples of interjections occurring alone and not expressing the speaker's feeling or emotion seem to suggest that they may encode a different type of procedural meaning that enables interjections to contribute to communication differently.

Teachers must highlight that interjections are conventionalised linguistic elements that cannot be freely replaced by other interjections in a specific context (Schourup 2001). As a result of their repeated usage in a context with a particular meaning, they get connected with that meaning (Wilkins 1992). If that connection is too close, it can even be thought that some interjections are associated with a particular concept, even if vague or general (e.g. FEELING, ORDER). That vague or general concept could either subsume other more specific concepts (e.g. HAPPINESS, SADNESS – in the case of emotive or expressive interjections), which could be further specified by hearers during comprehension (e.g. EUPHORIA, DISAPPOINTMENT).

Interjections, moreover, are also indexical elements. Indexicality is a property that allows them to “[...] index entities in the extralinguistic context as fillers of the argument position in [a] proposition underlying [them]” (Wilkins 1992: 132). That could imply that interjections have a sort of propositional template associated with them. Thus, emotive or expressive interjections would subcategorise a first person subject as an experiencer of a certain feeling and be associated to an underlying propositional template such as that in (21), in which the hearer would have to specify the feeling or emotion the speaker expresses and what originates that feeling or emotion or to what it is targeted:

(21) [EXPERIENCER] FEEL [FEELING/EMOTION] [>< (X)]

On the contrary, conative or volitive interjections would be associated to a propositional template such as that in (22), in which there would be an action that the speaker, subcategorised by the interjection as a subject, wants the hearer, subcategorised as an object-agent, (not) to do (cfr. Vassileva 1994; Vázquez Veiga and Alonso Ramos 2004):

(22) [SUBJECT] ORDER [OBJECT-AGENT] [(not) DO (X)]

Students should understand indexicality as the possibility to point to the external world. Such property certainly enables interjections, along with specific contextual information, such as manifest facts, stimuli or assumptions and preceding or following discourse, to convey propositions in an extremely schematic way (Schourup 2001; Świątkowska 2006). However, indexicality is fundamental to think that the procedural meaning of interjections can be different from that proposed by Wharton. Instead of exclusively helping hearers recover higher-level explicatures, interjections could be thought to encode instructions to recover specific contextual material that hearers would use to understand what speakers intend to communicate (Padilla Cruz 2009). This would not exclude the possibility that hearers also exploit interjections to construct higher-level explicatures.

Accordingly, emotive or expressive interjections would signal some contextual element that causes the feeling the speaker expresses or towards which that feeling is projected. In turn, conative or volitive interjections would signal an action that the speaker expects a particular individual (not) to perform. Teachers should make it clear that, although interjectional utterances do not have a phrasal, clausal or sentential surface structure, the instructions interjections encode can guide the hearer to

access some contextual material that he will need so as to infer what the speaker means and construct a certain proposition that he thinks corresponds to it. Thus, in a context in which an individual is talking during a lecture, he will interpret the interjection in (23) as a request or order to be quiet (25) as a result of having activated a concept such as ORDER and having found a particular action pointed by the speaker (24):

(23) Sh!

(24) [YOU] SHUT UP.

(25) My interlocutor wants/orders me to shut up.

Likewise, in a context in which an individual is about to enter a recently cleaned room which the speaker does not want him to enter, he will interpret (26) as an order not to enter the room (28) as a consequence of having activated a similar concept and having realised that the speaker signals a specific action (27) that she expects him not to do:

(26) Oi!

(27) [YOU] (not) ENTER ROOM.

(28) My interlocutor wants/orders me not to enter the dining-room.

Finally, in a context in which two friends meet in the street, the hearer of an interjection such as (29) will also activate a concept such as HAPPINESS or PLEASURE, note that the speaker signals some action that originates the feeling she is expressing (30) and obtain a proposition such as that in (31):

(29) Wow! Peter!

(30) [I] MEET (YOU).

(31) John is happy/glad/pleased to meet me.

Given that verbal communication is not a failure-safe activity, the proposition that the hearer infers and constructs from an interjectional utterance may not match the speaker's actual *informative intention*³. However, if the hearer attends jointly with the speaker to some events, facts, stimuli or states of affairs signalled and pointed, he can be rather likely to understand what she means.

6. Conclusion

This paper has shown that, apart from considering interjections as conversation fillers which fulfil three important communicative functions, teachers must make students aware of other functions of interjections and how they contribute to communication. In order to do so, teachers can certainly benefit from the work on interjections made in pragmatics over the last decades.

If one of the aims of SL or FL teaching is to make learners communicatively competent individuals, their SL/FL competence also requires a certain mastery of the usage of interjections. Teachers may not be able to develop that competence if they lack training in pragmatics or if they are not offered more information about such issues. Therefore, textbooks and teaching resources should devote more space to and include more aspects of interjections so as to raise both teachers and students' awareness of the importance of such linguistic items for interaction.

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³ In relevance-theoretic terms, the speaker's *informative intention* is the set of assumptions that she intends to make manifest to the hearer (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995).

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