Interjections

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No class of words has better claims to universality than interjections. At the same time, no category has more variable content than this one, traditionally the catch-all basket for linguistic items that bear a complicated relation to sentential syntax. Interjections are a mirror reflecting methodological and theoretical assumptions more than a coherent linguistic category that affords unitary treatment. This chapter focuses on linguistic items that typically function as free-standing utterances, and on some of the conceptual, methodological, and theoretical questions generated by such items. A key move is to study these items in the context of conversational sequences, rather than as a mere sideshow to sentences. This makes visible how some of the most frequent interjections streamline everyday language use and scaffold complex language. Approaching interjections in terms of their sequential positions and interactional functions has the potential to reveal and explain patterns of universality and diversity in interjections.

Introduction

Interjections rank among the most frequently used words in interaction, include some of the earliest words to emerge in language development, and have the best claim to universal occurrence across widely varied languages. They are also, in Ameka's memorable formulation, "the universal yet neglected part of speech" (Ameka 1992a) — a three decades old verdict that still holds for too many grammars (Lahaussois 2016). However, even if grammar writing may be slow to adapt, the ground is shifting under our feet as general linguistics comes to terms with the importance of interjections in everyday language use. This chapter surveys interjections in terms of three sets of themes. It shows that an understanding of interjections requires close attention to both form and function. It argues that interjections offer insights that can help linguistics extend its reach from isolated sentences to interactional sequences. And it shows that with functional and sequential aspects of interjections in mind, we can better understand patterns of unity and diversity.

First some terminological housekeeping. The most widely used definitions of interjections converge on at least the following two formal characteristics: prototypical

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interjections are (i) monolexemic lexical items that (ii) conventionally make up an utterance (Jespersen 1922; Ameka 1992a; Evans 1992; Wilkins 1992; Hofstede 1999; Elffers 2007; Poggi 2009). The first condition restricts the scope to uninflected, conventionalised linguistic items. The second condition sets apart prototypical interjections from utterance fragments that arise from ellipsis, from discourse particles that typically form part of utterances, and from lexicalised depictions like onomatopoeia and ideophones (Ameka & Wilkins 2006; Poggi 2009; Meinard 2015). Many words can be uttered alone given the right context, but only few are conventionally uttered alone.

A number of auxiliary provisions are sometimes added to these core characteristics. A common and useful structural distinction is between primary and secondary interjections (Bloomfield 1914). Primary interjections are items that primarily function as stand-alone utterances (think *Mmhm* or *Huh?*); secondary interjections are items that regularly form part of more complex utterances but that can be recruited to appear on their own (think *Thanks!* or *Sorry?* as well as other formulaic utterances and swears). The two conditions above privilege the primary type, which suits our focus on interjections as a word class.

Some accounts include semantic criteria linking interjections to the expression of feelings or mental states (Goffman 1978; Wierzbicka 1992). While this does capture a folk understanding of interjections as public emissions of private emotions, it risks prematurely excluding classes of one-word-utterances less clearly in the business of expressing affect. When we talk about interjections in the context of word classes, the two formal characteristics of monolexemicity and conventional utterancehood are probably sufficient to achieve a degree of typological comparability, while alerting us to the possibility of considerable diversity in terms of form and function.

Form and function

For the longest time, interjections have been primarily seen in terms of what they are not. Going back to Latin grammar, the term "interjection" has invited linguists to accord these items at most an *ad interim* status and to use the notion as a catch-all bin containing everything that finds no easy home within the sentence. The result is a category that seems to host a bewildering variety of items. One could almost call this a pretheoretical notion of interjections, were it not for the fact that it actually reveals a fairly explicit theoretical stance: namely, that what matters in linguistics is complex sentences and their structure, and that the things thrown in between them —*inter iectio*— are a sideshow at best. A moment's thought reveals this stance to be incoherent. The linguist selectively disregarding items that happen to occur on their own is rather like the chemist who discounts helium and neon just because they seldom combine with other elements. A linguistics without interjections is like a periodic table without the noble gases.

As a group, primary interjections appear to deviate from other words in terms of structure (Karcevski 1941; Ehlich 1986). To be precise, they tend to be composed of a set of elements that is (i) smaller than and (ii) only partly overlapping with the larger phonological system of a language. This makes them one of the prime places where we can find evidence for multiple coexistent phonemic systems within a language (Fries & Pike 1949). While some degree of phonological or phonotactic deviance is common, it is not definitional of interjections. The vowelless acknowledgement token *mm* is not more or less of an interjection than the change of state token *oh*.

Another striking feature of some common interjections is that relative to most other words, their forms appear to be more fluid and subject to prosodic modification: they are like verbal gestures (Bolinger 1968; Ward 2006; Grenoble 2014). Intimately related to this is their frequently multimodal nature, with nods for instance accompanying and sometimes replacing interjections like *mmhm*. Sometimes this has led to interjections being described as "non-lexical", a term avoided here because it detracts from the systematic, conventionalized nature of these items. Interjections could be said to form a distinct lexical stratum subject to its own selective pressures and with its own semiotic properties. This should not surprise us: if natural languages feature sets of monolexemic items whose main business is at levels that transcend clause structure, it is to be expected that such items will adapt to this ecology.

The earliest formal characterizations of interjections often went hand in hand with a narrow functional description: interjections were seen as words expressing the speakers' emotions. Even scholars whose frameworks provided room for recognizing a larger range of functions of language (Bühler 1934; Jakobson 1960) typically reduced interjections to this kind of emotive or expressive role (Elffers 2008). However, a look at the functions of items classified as interjections shows that this is too limited a conception (Kockelman 2003). The sociologist Goffman (1978) described some functions of English interjections. Even though his focus was primarily on exclamative uses, his attention to the structure of social interaction meant that besides relatively private exclamations like spill cries (*whoops*) and threat startles (*eek*) he recognized also transition displays (*brrr* when coming in from the cold) and floor cues (e.g., *huh?* while reading the news to open a conversation with someone copresent).

Ehlich's monumental (1986) work on German —possibly the most in-depth study of interjections in any one language so far— marked a change in the study of interjections because of its empirical focus and broad theoretical scope, taking inspiration from general linguistics, pragmatics, and the philosophy of language. Starting from a formally defined category of freestanding monosyllabic V and CV forms, this work catalogued the interactional and interpersonal functions of a range of German interjections. Its strict empirical grounding in corpus data meant that rather than featuring stereotypical examples like expressions of sudden pain or surprise (as most treatments of interjections did and still do), the account focused on the highly frequent

yet often overlooked *hm* and kin, and their primarily interactional functions of signaling recipiency.

Other corpus studies have since borne out the relative rarity of purely emotive interjections. For instance, in one corpus of spoken Dutch (Huls 1982), the great majority of interjection tokens was found to have interactional and interpersonal functions, and only about 7% (29 out of 412) was expressive of the speaker's mental state (Hofstede 1999). Likewise, a corpus-based study of interjections in Swedish Sign Language showed that the most frequent lexical signs categorized as interjections have backchanneling and affirmative functions, and account for over 80% of corpus tokens (Mesch 2016). Based on this, we can say that the idea of interjections as primarily emotive words, though understandable from a historical perspective, is untenable and provides only a partial view of the word class as a whole.

If interjections are not merely and not even mainly emotive words, how can we better characterize their communicative uses? A useful framework is provided by Ameka (1992a; and see Ameka & Wilkins 2006). Adopting a set of distinctions made by Jakobson (1960), Ameka observes that most interjections can be characterized in terms of three broad sets of communicative functions. EXPRESSIVE interjections are primarily symptoms of a producer's cognitive or emotive state; CONATIVE interjections primarily invite an action or response from another party in the interaction; and PHATIC interjections are primarily used to establish and maintain communicative contact.

Though examples could be given of interjections that occupy focal points within these categories (e.g., expressive *wow*, conative *sh!*, phatic *mmhm*), the functions are not mutually exclusive. A repair initiating interjection like *huh?* is both conative (in that it invites a repetition from the other) and phatic (in that it is tasked with preventing communicative breakdown). And a continuer like *mmhm* can be seen as both expressive (in that it indicates a state of attention) and phatic (in that it is used to maintain communicative contact). The main utility of this framework is that it provides an effective way to characterize and understand the diversity of items grouped under the term "interjections".

From sentence to sequence

Since interjections typically make up an utterance of their own, it is tempting to think we can understand them in the same way: as items that can be picked up and inspected in isolation. But to do so would be to miss the opportunity to see interjections as part of an organization that transcends the sentence and that provides its own sets of constraints and structuring principles. This means we need to study interjections in their home environment, which is the turn-by-turn unfolding of conversational sequences (Evans 1992). The need for such a SEQUENTIAL perspective is perhaps clearest in the case of interjections that serve social-interactional communicative functions, so that is where we will start.

Phatic interjections

One of the most common functions served by interjections in interaction is to display an understanding that an extended unit of talk is underway (Schegloff 1982). Interjections with this function are known as continuers, backchannels, acknowledgement tokens, or reactive tokens (Yngve 1970; Allwood et al. 1990; O'Keeffe & Adolphs 2008), the variety in terms reflecting the fact that they have historically been approached from many different disciplinary directions. Items with this kind of function occur at the boundaries of turn-constructional units, where they "demonstrate both that one unit has been received and that another is now awaited" (Goodwin 1986: 206).

The following transcript is from a conversation in Siwu (a Kwa language of Ghana) in which Foster and Beatrice talk about house building and discuss why there might be several unfinished compound houses in their hometown in eastern Ghana. The excerpt starts with Foster providing his own take on the situation, in response to which Beatrice produces a continuer *m̀:hm* (line 53). Continuing his account, Foster gives one example of an unfinished house in the neighbourhood. He quickly follows up with another example (line 56), a turn that ends up fully overlapping a further continuer *m̀:hm* by Beatrice that targeted his first example (line 57). After a two second silence, Beatrice now produces a short >*mm*<. (line 59), just as Foster reaches the conclusion of his telling. The closing is marked by Beatrice's appreciative *↑m:m̀:* at line 62.[1]

Extract 1. Siwu (Kwa, Ghana) (Maize3_1013516)

51 F *àlà kɔ̌rɔ̃̌ ɔmagɛ̃̀ amɛ néɛ̀-*
because now town inside TP
Because currently in town,

52 *màturi sé mafɔ mìkã maɖé màtéré ɔ́só nè*
people HAB 3PL.collect PL.money 3PL.eat 3PL.run reason nɛ
people have been collecting advances, consuming them and running off, that's why.

53 B **m̀:hm**

54 (0.5)

55 F *nyɔ álé kɔ̃rɔ̃̌ nyɔ, nyɔ fóò Kofi ayo gɔ́ ákãmu àɣéè*
look like now look look brother PSN A.houses how A.rooms AGR.stand
Look even now look, look at bro Kofi's houses, how the rooms stand.

56 *kà [wɔ̀ɛ̀kpɔ́ Ká]bɛ̀lɛ̀ aɣo akãmu aɣéɛ̀ ḿmɔ̀.*
now you.see PSN A.houses A.rooms AGR.stand there
Or see Kabɛlɛ's compound rooms just standing there.

57 B **[m̀:hm]**

58 (2.1)

[1] Transcription follows conversation analytic standards (Jefferson 2004), including the following conventions: (0.5) silence in seconds, - self-repaired item, [overlapping speech, : lengthening, >< shortening, **.** final intonation, m relative prominence, ↑ higher pitch. Siwu orthography is fairly close to IPA with tone marked *à-a-á* Low-Mid-High. Interlinear glosses use Leipzig conventions.

59 >**m[m.<**
60 F [*nɔ́so kà ɔ̀turi- sí ɔ́túri ɔ́ba ɔ̀tā́ íɣó, ɔ̀to ɔ̀nígā́*
reason now person- if person 3SG.have 3SG.give house 3SG.PROG 3SG.fear
So now person- if a person has a house to build, they fear!
61 (0.9)
62 B ↑**m**:**m̀**:
63 F hɛ̲̃:ɛ̃̀:

A stretch of conversation like this affords unparalleled analytical purchase on interjections because we see them in their own habitat, produced and interpreted by people in the flow of social interaction (Schegloff 1982; Bavelas et al. 2000). The established fields of conversation analysis and interactional linguistics provide us with the technical and conceptual tools to describe the construction of turns and the sequential relations between them — a prerequisite for the sequential analysis of interjections and other minimal particles (Clift 2016; Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2017).

A first thing to note is that the placement of the items in focus is highly precise and matters for participants (Goodwin 1986). Beatrice's *m̀:hm̲*'s occur exactly when and where they are due, namely following complete turn-constructional units in anticipation of further material (lines 53, 57). It so happens that Beatrice's *m̀:hm̲* at line 57 is produced just as Foster is one syllable into his second example, showing it to be addressed to the first (line 55), which was indeed hearably complete. As Foster's second example (structurally parallel to the first) is completed, another space where a continuer would be relevant opens up. The silence that follows at this point (line 58) is 'owned' by both participants (Hoey 2020a). By not continuing to speak now, Foster creates a noticeable absence, showing that this is indeed a place where some kind of response would be due. By withholding a response, Beatrice provides room for a possible further example, which, however, does not follow. The silence grows to 2.1 seconds —decidedly long in the context of the rapid-fire turn-taking that characterizes everyday language use (Stivers et al. 2009)— and is then broken near-simultaneously as Beatrice delivers a brisk continuer >*mm.*< and Foster delivers the punchline to his telling. Beatrice's final *↑m:m̀:* responds to this ending and is followed by a sequence-closing third (Schegloff 2007).

The sum of Beatrice's contributions in this excerpt is a series of *mm*-like tokens, which brings home one important function of this kind of item: acknowledging the other's turn while passing the opportunity to take the floor (Schegloff 1982). But the forms are not all the same: they come in multiple variants and appear to be finely adjusted to their sequential environment (Goodwin 1986). We find *m̀:hm* [ʔm̩̀mm̩̀mm̩:], equivalent in function to English *Uh-huh* and with a disyllabic form that seems well-fitted to its two-headed sequential nature, part retrospective acknowledging the prior turn, part prospective anticipating the next. We also have a brief >*mm.*< [m̩] that appears addressed to the urgency created by the turn-taking scuffle. And finally we

have a longer ↑*m:m:* [m̩:m̩:] whose high-low prosodic delivery can be heard as indicating involvement and appreciation (Wilkinson & Kitzinger 2006), fitting the sequential environment of story completion. Its prosodic delivery is replicated at lower pitch in Foster's final *hɛ̃:ɛ̀:*, closing the conversational sequence.

The diversity in surface forms makes items like this pliable tools for showing various degrees of recipiency, alignment and involvement (Müller 1996; Wilkinson & Kitzinger 2006; Williams et al. 2020). But below this lies a deeper commonality that is likely functionally motivated: as vowelless nasals produced with labial closure, continuers are among the most minimal tokens of recipiency available to users of spoken language (Gardner 2001). As we saw earlier, acknowledgement tokens account for 80% of interjections attested in a corpus of Swedish Sign Language (Mesch 2016). Likewise, in the CallHome corpora of American English, Arabic, German, Mandarin Chinese and Japanese, these items occur in up to 1 in 5 turns (Cecil 2010), making continuers likely the most frequent type of interjection within and across languages.

Another common type of phatic interjection is bound up with the organization of repair (Schegloff et al. 1977). In the following example from Norwegian Sign Language, Abe and Carl discuss the amount to be paid for some shared presents at a Christmas party. The transcript shows gaze, interlinear glosses corresponding to lexical signs, and a free translation in English. At line 1, Abe presents a tentative understanding of the monetary arrangements. While this would ordinarily invite confirmation or disconfirmation, Carl instead produces a freeze-look (a marked lack of mobility often responded to as a repair initiation (Manrique & Enfield 2015)) and after that a non-manual assemblage that is functionally equivalent to an articulatorily minimal "Huh?" (line 3). This prompts a redoing by Abe of the original turn (line 4).

Extract 2. Norwegian Sign Language (Skedsmo 2020: 9–11)

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1.    Abe   Gaze: Forward-Carl---------------
            Sign: MEAN MEAN I MY WOMAN SUM 400
            Trns: So, for me and my girlfriend, the sum is 400?

2.    Carl  Gaze: Abe--------------
       →A   Sign: (Freeze-look 0.6)

3.          Gaze: Abe--------------------------------------------------
       →B   Sign: (Leans forward, raises upper lip and lowers eyebrows)
            Trns: Huh ?!

4. Abe      Gaze: Carl-------------------------------------------------
            Sign: MEAN WOMAN MY WITH MEAN I TRA[NSFER   4]00
            Trns: So,if my girlfriend is coming I transfer four hundred.

5. Carl     Gaze: Abe--------------------------------------------------
            Sign:                                [NO NO-NO]         NO-NO
            Trns:                                No, no,no,       no, no.
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It may be tempting to see a repair expression like this simply as an instinctive expression of surprise, not even worthy of linguistic status. However, typological work shows that across languages, these items are calibrated to local linguistic systems and are an integral part of a larger paradigm of formats for repair initiation (Enfield et al. 2013). For instance, in the example from Norwegian Sign Language above, the non-manual composition of the repair-initiating turn at line 3 taps into the prosodic system of the language, in which eyebrow actions are used to mark questions. Moreover, the sequential follow-up —a redoing of the prior turn— makes clear that these items are treated as initiating repair, not as expressing an emotion like surprise.

The short excerpts of conversation shown here represent the primary ecology of language as a social phenomenon. This is where language thrives, where it is learned and where it adapts to our communicative needs and cognitive capacities. Even without going into detail about the larger system of continuers in Siwu or repair initiation formats in Norwegian Sign Language, it is clear that phatic interjections serve important communicative functions, are deployed in systematic ways, and are finely adapted to their sequential environments. Indeed, an argument could be made that interjections are so important in streamlining social interaction that we may owe some of the celebrated flexibility and complexity of human language to these humble words.

Since the sequential perspective is not one that has been historically prominent in language description and typology, **Table 1** provides a nonexhaustive list of three basic interactional practices and sequential positions that should be available for inspection in even the shortest stretches of conversation in any language (Schegloff 1982; Jefferson 1972; Heritage 1984). Given the metacommunicative importance of these practices, it is to be expected that every natural language will have at least some means to realise them; and given their sequential contexts of occurrence, it is likely that interjections will be prominent among them. Note that the practices are characterized in terms of function and sequential position rather than by form. Such language-agnostic technical characterizations enable comparative research (Zimmerman 1999) in a way that is quite similar to the use of semantic-functional characterizations rather than language-specific categories in linguistic typology. The examples are from Siwu, but cross-linguistic similarities may crop up, a matter discussed below.

Table 1. Three frequent interactional functions covered by interjections, with examples from Siwu and English translations

Practice	Sequential context	Examples (Siwu)
Continuer	between turns during a telling-in-progress	*m̀ːhm* 'mm-hm'
Repair initiator	following any turn and inviting a redoing in next turn	*ã?* 'huh?'
News receipt	following an informing turn (closing-implicative)	*aː* 'oh'

As the most frequent and dependable little words shaping our linguistic lives, phatic interjections deserve pride of place in our accounts of the word class of interjections. Yet somehow they are the least likely to occur in grammatical descriptions and comparative studies. One reason for the neglect of phatic interjections is that the sheer degree to which we depend on these items may have blinded us to their significance. Just as glasses or shoes sink below our awareness as they seamlessly augment our perceptual and motor systems, so phatic interjections have become so wound up with the very machinery of social interaction that we no longer see them for what they are: highly adaptive tools that streamline our language use at every turn. A more mundane reason for the neglect of these items is that at least until recently, most grammars were written based on elicitation and predominantly monological text corpora. Fortunately, documentary linguistics is enriching its data and methods, and there is a growing number of grammars that do orient to interactional data (Ameka 1991; Enfield 2007; Mihas 2017; Rüsch 2020; Sicoli 2020).

Conative interjections

While the main orientation of phatic interjections is at the flow of social interaction, conative interjections are primarily directed at others. Sequentially they are mostly bound up with securing attention and recruiting others to do something. A common case are summonses for calling people across a distance, as in the following example from Ewe, in which the call *ú:ru* is repeated by the other to indicate receipt and open the interaction. From a sequential perspective, such repetition is another piece of evidence that the interjection is treated not as a mere private expression but as a move in interaction that creates the conditions for a specific type of next move. Many languages have summonses like this; as Ameka notes, Australian English *cooee!* (Wierzbicka 1991) is functionally similar. Commonly mentioned under this rubric are also calls for silence like *sh!* (in English), which do not so much demand that the other does something but rather refrains from doing something.

Extract 3. Ewe (Kwa, Ghana) (Ameka 1992b: 12)

1 A **ú:ru**
2 B **ú:ru**
3 A *me-ɖu ŋgɔ ló ló*
1SG-eat front FP.ADV
'I'm taking the lead!'
4 *yoo m'-a-va! fífiá!*
OK 1SG-IRR-come now
'OK, I'll come soon.'

A subset of conative interjections in need of broader description is animal-oriented calls. People have interacted with animals since time immemorial, and especially domestic animals are regular targets for directives. While it is certainly possible to talk to animals using complex language (and some pet owners will go to great lengths in interpreting a fairly limited set of responsive behaviours), the most effective directives appear to be monolexemic calls that can function as standalone utterances; in other words, interjections. Two broad classes of animal-oriented interjections are those that aim to make animals move off and those that call animals to come. **Table 2** shows animal-oriented interjections in Lao corresponding to these two categories. While the 'go' forms appear as single units, the 'come' forms "are usually repeated, over and over (e.g., as *cuuj1-cuuj1-cuuj1-cuuj1-cuuj1* for calling pigs to come)". Two of them also feature falsetto phonation.

Table 2. Animal-oriented interjections in Lao (Enfield 2007: 315)

Animal	'Go'	'Come'
Cattle	*huj1* or *huj5* or alveolar click	*heeq2* or *qaawq5*
Chicken	*soo4* or rounded [ʃ:]	*kuk2* (falsetto)
Pig	(not attested)	*cuuj1* (falsetto)
Dog	*sêêq2*	*qèèq5* or *qèèk5*
Cat	*mèèw5* (breathy)	*mòng1*

Studies of such directives are relatively rare (Bynon 1976; Ameka 1992b; Amha 2013) and few grammars consider them worthy of mention (rare exceptions are Enfield 2007 on Lao; Orkaydo 2013 on Konso; Visser 2020 on Kalamang). Within the class of interjections, however, they do present an instructive case of how human language can adapt to radical asymmetries in agency and action-perception systems. The most important functional pressure on these words is that they have to serve as a stimulus that reliably results in the desired response. What counts as an effective stimulus may differ across species, and so we may find clicks used with cattle and sibilants with chickens. At the same time, these items do adapt to the larger linguistic system to some extent, as seen for instance in the fact that many of the Lao forms conform to the phonotactics of the language.

Expressive interjections

So far we have seen the importance of a sequential perspective for understanding interjections that take up phatic and conative work in social interaction. But a sequential perspective can also enrich our understanding of expressive interjections. A first inkling of this is provided in Goffman's study of English response cries. As he showed, even expressive interjections often crucially depend on the larger context of

situation and manage expectations about the next move in the sequence. For instance, while it is possible to think of the strain grunt as merely a symptom of physical exertion, in fact it often has an interactional function, alerting others or serving in the temporal coordination of joint efforts. In stylized form, a strain grunt can serve as a marker of a transition from a joint activitity to an assessment of that activity, as Pehkonen (2020) showed for Finnish [ʰuhʷ ʰuhʷ] following the physical exertion of a climb with others. It is worth noting that this is another case that is not easily observed in monologic textual materials: Pehkonen observed it in video recordings of forest hikes for berry foraging.

Similarly, a moan might be seen as no more than an outcry of suffering; but to stop there would be to overlook the fact that most often, when we encounter "moans" or other indexes of suffering in interaction, they are transformed and ritualized versions that are multiple steps removed from the putative original crisis, recruited to do subtle interactional work. For instance, empirical work on playful "moans" in the context of board game interaction shows that they signal suffering as well as a willingness to continue play (Hofstetter 2020). This use relies on one of the affordances of an expressive interjection, namely that it does not directly appeal to the audience for a response. Goffman's example is of an "ouch" when presented with the plumber's bill: "To the plumber, we are precisely NOT saying: 'Does the bill have to be that high?'—such a statement would require a reply, to the possible embarassment of all" (Goffman 1978: 807).

From liminal signs to interjections

The sequential perspective on interjections brings into view a neighbouring phenomenon that I have elsewhere described using the notion of LIMINAL SIGNS: "signs that derive interactional utility from being ambiguous with respect to conventionality, intentionality, and accountability" (Dingemanse 2020b). These are items like sighs, sniffs, and other bodily conduct that neither users nor analysts of language have been inclined to count as linguistic or even communicative, but that on closer look turn out to benefit from being precisely in the borderland between language and non-language. In English, for instance, a sniff placed before or during a turn can serve to delay the progression of that turn, signalling delicacy (Hoey 2020b); and a central alveolar click [!] is sometimes observed in the service of signalling a disapproving stance without explicitly saying anything (Ogden 2020).

A sketch of the lay of the land here will help us to better understand the relation between liminal signs and interjections. Crucially, while sequential analysis makes visible how people skillfully use liminal signs in interaction, they are not treated as "on the record" or accountable in the same way as more conventionalized linguistics items are, in part because they often repurpose bodily conduct that is going on anyway. After all, a sniff might be 'just' an inhalatory action and a click 'just' the percussive sound

made as the articulators separate in preparation to speak. This liminality is precisely what makes such items useful for transitory interactional work and for things that are better left unsaid.

In comparison, interjections play much more explicit, on-record roles in language and interaction. They tend to have clearly conventionalized forms and functions. Even if they can exhibit nonstandard phonology, they also recruit elements from the larger phonemic system of the language. And the fact that there are dedicated sequential environments in which they reliably occur, invite certain responses, or can be noticeably absent (as we saw for continuers, repair interjections, and distance calls) shows that they are treated as conventionalized and accountable interactional resources, distinct from liminal signs.

Though we can draw distinctions based on conventionality and accountability, liminal signs and interjections are best seen as designating regions in a space gradiently inhabited by a range of interactional practices. For instance, one account of the stand-alone central alveolar click [!] in English conversation shows it to be used as a device to deliver an unspoken comment without being taken to respond (Ogden 2020): a prime example of the in-betweenness exploited by liminal signs. On the other hand, Laal and a number of other languages in Chad have recruited a series of clicks to form a paradigm of interjections with interactional and interpersonal functions, which speakers recognize as conventionalized and treat as accountable actions (Lionnet 2020). This makes visible one source path for interjections: bodily conduct may be recruited in liminal signs, which in turn may develop into full-blown interjections as they become increasingly conventionalised and on-record.

A related kind of gradience can be found for items with ostensibly similar functions. An interjection like *yes* is widely recognized as a conventional, on-record response (Enfield & Sidnell 2015), but not far removed from it we find gesturally modified variants like *yep* (Bolinger 1946), which shade into closed-mouth affirmative continuers like *uh-huh* and *mm-hm* and, ultimately, head nods. We seem to move from clear affirmation to mere passive recipiency along a cline of increasing informality and decreasing on-recordness. One piece of evidence for this cline is that an outright *yes*, but not an *uh-huh* or a head nod, counts as confirmation in court (Ward 2006). The origins of interjections, and the ways in which people flexibly use semiotic resources to navigate conventionality, intentionality and accountability represent key areas for future research.

We have seen how a sequential perspective can help to untangle variation in the form and function of interjections, and can provide the working linguist with a methodological framework to guide the study of interjections. As we develop a more comprehensive understanding of the forms, functions and sequential positions of interjections, we will also be in a better position to understand their relations to other linguistic items and systems.

Unity and diversity

The notion of interjections has long been a mirror reflecting theoretical assumptions and preoccupations (Elffers 2007). Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in how we deal with the themes of unity and diversity. To scholars for whom interjections are barely more than instinctive grunts, they are universally available response cries with at most a little bit of language-specific varnish (Whitney 1874; Jackendoff 2002). To scholars for whom interjections represent an area of cultural expression, they show a veritable flowering of forms and functions (Karcevski 1941; Wierzbicka 1991). To resolve this tension we need neither pick one of the extremes nor settle for a boring middle ground. The solution is to recognise that it is only an apparent tension that results from treating interjections as a monolithic group. The inventory of one-word utterances is rich enough, and their communicative functions diverse enough, to allow and indeed expect diversity in some places and unity in others.

Let us start with the theme of diversity. There are many interjections with highly specific meanings (Wierzbicka 2003). For instance, Ewe has an interjection *babaà* expressing commiseration. It is sometimes translated as 'sorry' and can indeed also be used in apologies, but its primary meaning foregrounds an element of compassion and excludes the personal responsibility associated with 'sorry' in English (Ameka 1991: 582–5). Konso, a Cushitic language of southwest Ethiopia, has an interjection *ef* 'I am disgusted by what you said and I want you to stop talking about this' (Orkaydo 2013: 256), a highly specific conventional meaning that combines expressive, phatic and conative elements. Kalamang of West Papua has an interjection to call a cassowary *luːaluːaluːaluːaluːa* (Visser 2020: 114), while Zargulla (Omotic, Ethiopia) has a paradigm of interjections directed at oxen, including *horó* 'directive to resume movement after stopping for a while' (Amha 2013: 238). Clearly, there is room for a great deal of diversity in form and function.

Further, even interjections with similar functions need not have the same form, as seen in forms used in communication over distance like Ewe *uːrú*, Australian English *cooeee*, Polish *hop, hop*, and Russian *au* (Wierzbicka 1992; Ameka 1992b). And vice versa, interjections similar in form often turn out, on closer inspection, to feature significant functional differences. For instance, Polish *pst* can be used to warn someone else to be silent, while Russian *pst* is more like an expression of disapproval (Wierzbicka 2003: 295–6). Even a fundamental interactional practice like backchanneling can show important differences in frequency across languages, with the ratio of backchannels in Japanese being twice as high as in English (Clancy et al. 1996).

In short, in the realm of interjections there is ample room for linguistic and cultural diversity, as documented by semantic and lexicographical work (Ameka & Wilkins 2006; Jensen et al. 2019). Seen in this light, it is no surprise that Anna Wierzbicka has staked out the position that "far from being universal and 'natural' signs that don't have to be

learnt, interjections are often among the most characteristic peculiarities of individual cultures" (Wierzbicka 2003: 258).

Sources of commonality

Alongside room for diversity we can recognize sources of commonality. To do this — for interjections as for any linguistic resource— we need to consider the relevant causal-temporal frames (Enfield 2014). Most relevant in the context of interjections are the frames of *phylogeny* (the biological evolution of language), *diachrony* (the cultural evolution of language, or language change) and *enchrony* (the moment-by-moment unfolding of language in interaction). These frames raise two questions, whose answers may differ for each subclass of interjections: first, where do interjections come from? And second, what selective pressures shape them?

Phylogeny tells us that some interjections can be linked to ancestral vocalizations or bodily responses. Pain interjections provide an instructive example. Most spoken languages appear to make available a pain interjection that has as its nucleus and prosodic peak an open central unrounded vowel. It is hard to escape the conclusion that such forms harken back to a common mammalian pain vocalization (Darwin 1872; Ehlich 1985). Some disgust interjections may be similarly motivated by bodily motions of revulsion. Of course, even having probable phylogenetic precursors does not stop particular languages from imposing a degree of conventionalization and diversification, as we see in interjections of pain and disgust (Byington 1942; Wierzbicka 1991).

While direct ancestral precursors may be plausible for some expressive interjections, the story is likely to be more subtle for most other interjections. Above we saw how the bodily conduct recruited in liminal signs offers another possible source for interjections. The flexible harnessing of semiotic resources for communicative purposes brings us into the cultural realm, where processes of semiosis and convention formation conspire at the enchronic and diachronic timescales to arrive at adaptive solutions. Here the possibilities are virtually endless —hence the attested diversity— but to the extent that there are interactional needs shared by embodied participants everywhere, we may also expect similar solutions to emerge.

A well known example is the repair interjection, which in spoken languages tends to sound a lot like 'a?', or more precisely, a monosyllable with a low-front central vowel and questioning intonation (as first reported in Dingemanse et al. 2013 for 31 languages). The deep commonality cannot be separated from the fact that all languages share the same high-stakes sequential environment, where misunderstanding is always possible and time is in short supply. This enchronic environment calls for a form that is maximally easy to plan and produce, yet still recognizably interrogative. Given enough diachronic time, the selective pressures exerted by this environment are likely to result in convergence towards what we might call the simplest possible question word — a reasonable gloss for *a?* and kin in spoken languages (with language-specific

tuning as expected). Known sign language equivalents appear to conform to the same logic, formulating a minimal question using non-manual prosody (Manrique 2016 for Argentine Sign Language; Skedsmo 2020 for Norwegian Sign Language).

Continuers have not been subjected to the same kind of systematic comparison yet, but they seem to present a similar case (Clancy et al. 1996). In the Siwu example we saw how *m:hm* helps shape the delivery of stories by displaying alignment with the storytelling activity. Many spoken languages appear to make a similar nasal vocalization available for the same interactional work, as seen in *m-hm* in English (Gardner 2001), *mm* in Danish (Steensig & Sørensen 2019), *ˈn̥m̥* in Wa'ikhana (Williams et al. 2020), and *m/ŋ* in Cantonese (Liesenfeld 2019). Such forms are well-adapted to serve as continuers because they signify ongoing attention with minimal articulatory effort and provide the perfect canvas to overlay with prosodic contours for stance-marking (as Gardner 2001 argues for English). Again, known sign language equivalents similarly seem to recruit articulatorily minimal, prosodically flexible expressions that are well-adapted to the functional requirements of continuers (Mesch 2016), suggesting that common interactional ecologies can result in convergent cultural evolution across modalities.

Conative interjections represent further pressures towards cross-linguistic commonalities. Calls that need to bridge long distances, occluded environments or other obstructions to joint attention need to be conspicuous enough to do so. This helps explain some structural aspects of distance calls in spoken languages but also the nature of attention-getting signs in sign languages, which frequently employ visually salient movements and sometimes even touch (Haviland 2015). These signs are shaped not so much by the exigencies of turn-taking and timing as by the challenges of achieving perceptual access and attracting attention.

In explaining cross-linguistic and cross-modal commonalities in interjections, we reap the fruits of a sequential perspective. This allows us to see how a particular conversational ecology can exert its own set of selective pressures (of timing, turn-taking, effort, salience, unobtrusiveness, and more) and so, over time, squeeze frequently used interactional resources into optimally adaptive shapes. This process is particularly relevant for interjections found in high-stakes sequential environments. Indeed, we can formulate this in terms of a weak statistical universal: *Human languages are likely to make available similar semiotic resources for interactional functions that are both (i) sequentially comparable and (ii) highly frequent.* This is a statistical universal in that it expresses a probability, not a universal law; and a weak one in that it predicts such resources to be available without excluding the recruitment of other, more divergent or more functionally heterogeneous resources.

The limiting case is formed by the curious case of animal-oriented interjections. These items are adapted to near-incommensurable asymmetries in agency, perception and action. We see here a rare corner of language that is close to putting behaviour

under direct stimulus control (Skinner 1957) — an extreme narrowing of the justly celebrated flexibility of human language (Chomsky 1959). Here, constraints on the receiving end form direct pressures towards convergent cultural evolution, which explains why, for instance, words for shooing away birds overwhelmingly feature sibilant sounds across unrelated languages (Dingemanse 2020a). The most effective animal-oriented interjections appear to harness instinctive responses on the part of the animals: a case of mimicry in culturally transmitted signaling behaviour. Still, even here we find room for conventionalization. After all, English *shoo*, Wolaitta *šúh* (Amha 2013), and Lao *soo4* or [ʃ:] (Enfield 2007) show cross-linguistic differences despite all serving to chase away birds. And so, even in the unlikely area of cross-species communication, we encounter interjections as fundamentally linguistic signs.

In closing

A central insight of the mathematical classic *Flatland* (Abbott 1991 [1884]) is that we can learn to see dimensions beyond the ones we regularly inhabit. When a Sphere sets out to visit protagonist Square in the two-dimensional world, the only way Sphere can manifest itself is in terms of planar intersections. And just like the sphere's intersections at some point compel Square to contemplate a three-dimensional outlook, so interjections compel us to look at dimensions beyond the sentence. In the land of linear sentences, interjections are mere points without relations to other items; but in the higher dimensions of conversational sequences, they turn out to have lives of their own that are richly rewarding of study.

We have surveyed interjections from the perspectives of communicative functions, conversational sequences, and comparative linguistics. The picture that emerges is one of constrained diversity. Interjections, as conventionalized linguistic signs, can express culturally diverse meanings and can be put to a wide range of communicative purposes. But their diversity is constrained by phylogenetic origins, functional requirements, interactional ecologies, articulatory affordances, and perceptual factors. When we look beyond the handful of stereotypical examples that have come to be associated with interjections, a complex mosaic of forms and functions comes into view. Charting these forms and functions requires methods and theories that can deal with the interactional and sequential aspects of language. This means enriching general linguistics and grammar-writing with insights from pragmatics, interactional linguistics, and conversation analysis.

As word classes go, interjections likely will always be the odd one out: relatively small, internally diverse, and serving functions that seem foreign to the flatland of the sentence. Considered in isolation, as they so long have been, interjections may seem to exhibit bewildering variation. But when they come alive in conversational sequences, the variation turns out to be regimented by interactional ecologies that are the true home of interjections, and indeed of language.

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