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# Empirical and theoretical arguments against equating exclamatives and emotive assertions

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**Abstract:** In their target article entitled “Exclamation, intensity, and emotive assertion,” Trotzke and Giannakidou argue that exclamatives such as German *Wie schnell Ada war!* ‘How fast Ada was!’ are equivalent to emotive assertions such as *Ich bin sehr überrascht, wie schnell Ada war* ‘I am very surprised at how fast Ada was.’ This commentary challenges this equation on both empirical and theoretical grounds. Focusing on German, I discuss the external combinatorics of exclamatives, their internal make-up, and also the interpretation of the underlying emotive attitude. The discussion draws attention to substantial formal and functional differences between exclamatives and emotive assertions. Furthermore, it is argued that their commonalities should not be attributed to supposedly identical structures, but to independent common properties.

**Keywords:** exclamatives; verb-final root clauses; exclamation; emotive attitudes; German



## 1 Introduction

In their target article entitled “Exclamation, intensity, and emotive assertion,” Trotzke and Giannakidou (in the following T&G) argue that exclamatives are emotive assertions. Correspondingly, examples such as (1a) are considered equivalent to subordinate clauses embedded under an emotive matrix predicate (1b) and also to declarative exclamations (1c) [See T&G (Sect. 4) for examples analogous to (1).].

- (1) a. Wie schnell Ada war!  
      how fast Ada was  
      ‘How fast Ada was!’

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- b. Ich bin sehr überrascht, wie schnell Ada war.  
I am very surprised how fast Ada was  
'I am very surprised at how fast Ada was.'
- c. Ada war (aber auch) schnell!  
Ada was PART PART fast  
'Ada was so fast!'

Intuitively, all structures convey that the speaker is surprised at Ada's speed. The proposal captures this intuition within a uniform approach and thus avoids the assumption that exclamatives form a separate sentence type with its own illocutionary force. In the following, I will nevertheless take issue with the given equation on both empirical and theoretical grounds. Focusing on German, I will first discuss the external combinatorics of exclamatives (Sections 2 and 3), then turn to their internal make-up (Section 4), and finally dwell on the interpretation of the relevant attitude (Section 5).

## 2 Pairing of questions and answers

T&G (p. 38f. and Sect. 2.3) argue that exclamatives pattern with emotive assertions in question–answer pairs such as (2) [= T&G (68)]. This is tied to the more general assumption that exclamatives can answer information-seeking questions if the discourse conditions are appropriate, as in (3) [= T&G (20), slightly adapted] with a question that supports wide focus.

- (2) A: Wie denkst Du über Eliud im Olympia-Marathon?  
A: 'How do you think about Eliud in the Olympic Marathon?'
  - a. B: Ich bin überrascht, dass er so schnell war!  
B: I am surprised that he so fast was
  - b. B: Dass er so schnell war!  
B: that he so fast was
- (3) A: Tell me, how did Eliud Kipchoge do in the race?
  - a. B: [He was very fast.]<sub>Focus</sub>
  - b. B: My god! [How fast he was!]<sub>Focus</sub>
  - c. B: Mein Gott! [Der war aber auch schnell!]<sub>Focus</sub>  
B: my god! this.one was PART PART fast

The authors use such examples to show that exclamatives are regular emotive assertions. I disagree with this conclusion for the following reasons.

Let us proceed from the alternative assumption that exclamatives convey demonstrations of attitudes toward a state of affairs instead of corresponding assertions.<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, (3b) and (3c) are possible answers to A's question in (3) because the demonstration of surprise at Eliud's speed is an indirect source for information about the quality of his performance. Notably, T&G also need to access the relevant information indirectly. As they assume that exclamatives are headed by silent emotive predicates, the quality of Eliud's performance is merely an embedded piece of information. That is, examples such as (3) do not distinguish between the demonstration of an attitude and its assertion.

Similarly, (2b) may be possible because the demonstration of an attitude is a potential reaction to the question of which attitude an addressee has. That is, by demonstrating surprise, the addressee can let the questioner know that he is surprised. Moreover, I doubt the given judgment. To my ears, answering by demonstration is a marked strategy that addresses the given question in an indirect way. It seems to be felicitous only to the extent that the corresponding question is understood in relatively loose terms; see A's use of a *how*-question in combination with the predicate *think*. This is different in example (4):

(4) A: Bist Du überrascht, dass Eliud so schnell war?

A: 'Are you surprised that Eliud was so fast?'

a. B: Ja, ich bin überrascht, dass er so schnell war.

B: yes, I am surprised that he so fast was

b. B: # Ja, dass er so schnell war!

B: yes, that he so fast was

In this case, A's question is tailored more clearly to a regular assertion. Therefore, B should commit to the truth or falsehood of the proposition that he is surprised, which renders answering by demonstration less appropriate. Correspondingly, the exclamation in (4b) is worse than the assertion in (4a). This difference does not follow from the assumption that exclamatives are elliptical emotive assertions. Furthermore, T&G misrepresent the position of Truckenbrodt (2013) on this issue. They suggest that there is a difference between deliberative *ob*-interrogatives on the one hand and exclamatives on the other, with only the former being at odds with

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<sup>1</sup> A core meaning along these lines is found in several previous approaches to exclamatives, regardless of differences in detail. For instance, according to Krifka (2018: (29)), exclamatives contribute expressives that are conceived of as public demonstrations of attitudes. Similarly, Rett (2011) and Grosz (2012) build on the general idea that expressives are direct expressions of attitudes rather than commitments to attitudes through descriptions of oneself.

an elliptical analysis; see (5) [= Truckenbrodt 2013 (8), slightly adapted]. However, Truckenbrodt (2013) makes the very same argument for exclamatives; see his example (6) [= Truckenbrodt 2013 (10), slightly adapted].

- (5) A: Warum versuchst du, den Stein zu heben?  
 A: 'Why are you trying to lift the stone?'  
 a. B: Ich will wissen/frage mich, ob ich das schaffe.  
     B: I want know/ask myself whether I that manage  
 b. B: # Ob ich das schaffe?  
     B: whether I that manage
- (6) A: Wie findest du das, was du gesehen hast?  
 A: 'What do you think of what you saw?'  
 a. B: Es ist erstaunlich, wie schnell sie rennen kann.  
     B: it is amazing how fast she run can  
 b. B: # Wie schnell sie rennen kann!  
     B: how fast she run can

Truckenbrodt's judgment thus runs counter to the assessment of (2) in T&G. Rather, it sides with my position that, at best, exclamatives are substitutes for emotive assertions without being such assertions.

### 3 Attachment sites and anaphoric relations

Examples such as (7) [= T&G (70)] indicate that adverbial clauses cannot take scope over the surprise associated with exclamatives.

- (7) Dass Eliud eine Pause gemacht hat (# weil er arbeitssüchtig ist)!  
 That Eliud a break made has because he workaholic is  
 \*because he is a workaholic > [Speaker is amazed that Eliud took a break]

For Grosz (2012), this argues against a silent emotive matrix predicate within exclamatives. If exclamatives involved subordinating predicates, adverbial clauses should easily attach to these predicates. T&G (p. 40) disagree with this conclusion by attributing the observation in (7) to the fact that the speaker's surprise is not discourse-given, but asserted. For the following reasons, I side with Grosz' original position.

First, I do not understand the logic of the counterargument. If emotive predicates were present at the syntax–semantics interface, attachment sites should not be affected by whether the emotion is given by the preceding discourse or not. For one,

the example in (8) shows that adverbial clauses can scope over new content that is asserted. Furthermore, in (9), the surprise is discourse-given. Nevertheless, scope of the adverbial over this attitude remains as bad as in (7).

- (8) A: Was ist los? – B: Ich bin überrascht, dass Eliud  
 A: what is the matter? – B: I am surprised that Eliud  
 eine Pause macht, weil er arbeitssüchtig ist.  
 a break makes because he workaholic is
- (9) A: Ich merke, dass Du überrascht bist, dass Eliud eine Pause macht. Warum bist Du überrascht?  
 A: 'I can tell that you are surprised that Eliud is taking a break. Why are you surprised?'  
 a. B: Ich bin überrascht, dass er eine Pause macht, weil er  
 B: I am surprised that he a break makes because he  
 arbeitssüchtig ist.  
 workaholic is  
 b. B: # Dass er eine Pause macht, weil er arbeitssüchtig ist!  
 B: that he a break makes because he workaholic is

Second, various constraints on anaphoric relations corroborate Grosz' position from a different angle; see the following minimal pairs for exemplification:

- (10) a. Ich bin überrascht, dass Eliud eine Pause macht, aber ich  
 I am surprised that Eliud a break makes but I  
 merke, Du bist es nicht.  
 notice you are it not  
 'I am surprised that Eliud is taking a break, but I can tell that you are not.'  
 b. # Dass Eliud eine Pause macht, aber ich merke, Du bist es nicht.  
 that Eliud a break makes but I notice you are it not
- (11) a. Ich bin überrascht, dass Eliud eine Pause machen soll.  
 I am surprised that Eliud a break make should  
 Deshalb habe ich Zweifel, dass das stimmt.  
 therefore have I doubt that it is right  
 'I am surprised that Eliud is supposed to take a break. Therefore I doubt that this is true.'  
 b. # Dass Eliud eine Pause machen soll! Deshalb habe ich  
 that Eliud a break make should therefore have I  
 Zweifel, dass das stimmt.  
 doubt that it is right

- (12) a. Ich bin überrascht, dass Eliud eine Pause macht, wohingegen  
 I am surprised that Eliud a break makes whereas  
 meine Frau nicht überrascht ist.  
 my wife not surprised is  
 'I am surprised that Eliud is taking a break, whereas my wife is not  
 surprised.'
- b. # Dass Eliud eine Pause macht, wohingegen meine Frau nicht  
 that Eliud a break makes whereas my wife not  
 überrascht ist.  
 surprised is

The pronoun *es* 'it' can pick up an emotive predicate with emotive assertions, but not with exclamatives (10). Furthermore, the pronominal adverb *deshalb* 'therefore' can easily relate to the speaker's surprise only with emotive assertions (11). The same holds for introductory *wh*-pronouns in continuative relative clauses (12). Notably, these contrasts are independent of discourse conditions. They all favor the assumption that the attitude associated with exclamatives is introduced in a way that is structurally different from its introduction within emotive assertions.

## 4 Verb position, complementizer *dass*, discourse particle *aber auch*

The distributional observations discussed so far concern the external combinatorics of exclamatives in German. Let us now turn to their internal make-up. T&G draw on three aspects in particular: the verb position, the restriction to the complementizer *dass* 'that,' and the role of the discourse particle *aber auch* (lit. 'but also'). In the following, I would like to show that the respective arguments are not conclusive.

### 4.1 Verb position

T&G (p. 41) argue that "unambiguous exclamatives in German are always verb-final and thus feature embedded word order"; see (13) [= T&G (71)].

- (13) a. Dass der schön singen kann! [only exclamation]  
 that this.one beautiful sing can  
 'How surprising that he can sing beautifully!'

- b. Wie schnell der laufen kann! [only exclamation]  
 how fast this.one run can  
 ‘How fast he can run!’

The authors interpret this as support for their assumption that exclamatives involve subordination to silent emotive assertions. However, I see two problems with this reasoning.

First, Reis (1999: p. 202f.) points out that exclamations of whatever form generally build on syntactic structures that have their own grammatical function independently of the exclamative use; see also the comments on further form types below. This “double service” suggests that “exclamatory effects are in a way parasitic, which come about by interrogative or declarative meanings interacting with superimposed prosodic and lexical means of a certain type.” From this perspective, the syntactic structures in (13) *are* actually ambiguous, namely, they can also serve as regular subordinate clauses. The unambiguous exclamative reading follows from their use as independent root clauses, not from their syntactic make-up! This turns the argument of T&G on its head: It is the independent use of an otherwise dependent structure that makes for verb-final exclamatives. The proposed assimilation to emotive assertions with subordination fails to recognize this essential structural feature of the examples.

Second, the initial motivation for the analysis in T&G is based to a large extent on the idea that the emotion conveyed by exclamatives can be derived easily from the supposed silent emotive assertion. However, it then remains a major puzzle how to derive the emotive meaning in those cases where the verb is fronted; see, for instance, (14) [= T&G (78b), (73a), slightly adapted].

- (14) a. Eliud ist aber auch schnell!  
 Eliud is PART PART fast  
 ‘Wow! Eliud is so fast!’  
 b. Wie schnell ist der aber auch!  
 how fast is this.one PART PART  
 ‘How fast he is!’

These examples prohibit embedding under an emotive predicate such that the exclamatory effects need to be derived from other means. In light of the fact that these effects are of the same kind across verbal positions, this need is clearly unsatisfactory. This speaks in favor of the “double service” perspective, according to which exclamatory effects follow from what exclamatives of various syntactic forms share, namely, the interaction with specific prosody and lexical material.

## 4.2 Choice of complementizer

T&G (p. 42f.) point out that both exclamatives and emotive assertions with *surprise*-predicates use the declarative complementizer *dass* ‘that’ instead of the interrogative one *ob* ‘whether.’ The authors see this commonality as an indication of a structural identity between the two cases. However, for the following reason, this conclusion is not compelling. The selectional properties of *surprise*-predicates are a much-discussed issue; see Roelofsen et al. (2019) for an extensive discussion of various approaches. Despite considerable differences in detail, there is a broad consensus that combinatorial regularities are rooted in semantics or pragmatics, including procedural considerations, but not in syntax. For instance, very roughly, Roelofsen et al. (2019) argue as follows: *Surprise*-predicates are considered sensitive to which proposition is highlighted by the complement clause. While *whether*- and *that*-clauses highlight the very same proposition, *that*-clauses are simpler from a procedural perspective (namely, they lack the addition of complement propositions) and therefore take precedence over *whether*-clauses. It would be very natural to assume that the demonstration of surprise at a certain proposition is sensitive to the presentation of propositions in the very same way as *surprise*-predicates are. This predicts the same distribution of complementizers in exclamatives and emotive assertions without positing structural identity. Presumably, the same logic could be applied to the other accounts of the *whether*-puzzle.<sup>2</sup>

## 4.3 Distribution of discourse particles

T&G (p. 41–44) claim that *aber auch* (lit. ‘but also’) is confined to exclamations of various forms, while *denn* (lit. ‘for’) is confined to questions; see (15) [= T&G (77a), (78), slightly adapted] and (16) [= T&G (77b), slightly adapted].

- (15) a. Wie schnell ist der aber auch! [only exclamation]  
           how fast is this.one PART PART  
           ‘How fast he is!’  
       b. Dass Eliud aber auch so schnell ist!  
           that Eliud PART PART so fast is  
           ‘How surprising that Eliud is so fast!’

2 Notably, in their conclusions, Roelofsen et al. (2019) raise the question of whether the behavior of *surprise*-predicates is rooted in the emotive nature as such. The behavior of exclamatives then provides independent support for a generalization that goes beyond the level of predicates.



- c. Eliud ist aber auch schnell!  
 Eliud is PART PART fast  
 ‘Wow! Eliud is so fast!’
- (16) Wie schnell ist der denn? [only question]  
 How fast is this.one PART  
 ‘How fast is he (I’m wondering)?’

The authors aim at a general explanation for the distribution of *aber auch* in terms of force features. Based on the assumption that declarative exclamations such as (15c) have assertive force, they suggest that all utterances in (15) are assertions, namely, emotive assertions. This in turn would result in a natural class to which *aber auch* is sensitive. However, I think this argument is flawed in two crucial ways.

First, the assertive force that is argued for in the previous literature on declarative exclamations does not relate to the surprise, but to the stimulus of the surprise; see T&G (p. 10f.) in particular. That is, (15c) involves the speaker’s commitment to Eliud being fast. The previous literature certainly does not say that the speaker commits to an emotion. The entanglement of assertive forces on which the above argument is based is, therefore, unjustified. Notably, I do not say that the declarative exclamation in (15c) is a straightforward commitment to Eliud being fast. Following the lead of the “double service” perspective sketched above, I rather believe that the assertive force is superseded by exclamatory effects. This is the reason why (15c) is inappropriate as a regular commitment to Eliud’s speed, but patterns with demonstrations of emotions as conveyed by exclamations such as (15a) or (15b).

Second, contrary to what T&G assume, the following examples show that *aber auch* can be used in questions:<sup>3</sup>

- (17) a. Warum hat sich Ada (denn) aber auch so dumm verhalten?  
 why has herself Ada PART PART PART so stupidly behaved  
 ‘But why did Ada behave so stupidly?’
- b. Was hätte Ada (denn) aber auch sonst tun sollen?  
 what had Ada PART PART PART else do should?  
 ‘But what else should Ada have done?’

This argues against a force-based explanation of *aber auch*’s distribution. Roughly, *aber auch* depends on the following kind of situation: On the one hand, *aber auch* presupposes a remarkable state of affairs corresponding to the content of the

<sup>3</sup> One may add that the effect of the particle *denn* is also less clear than suggested. Specifically, I agree with Hans-Martin Gärtner (p. c.) that (16) supports an exclamation reading if *der* ‘this.one’ carries an exclamative accent followed by a clearly low accent on the particle.

utterance in which it occurs. On the other hand, this state of affairs is considered a natural explanation for why another state of affairs obtains; see Thurmair (1989: p. 251f.) for a similar interpretation. For instance, in (18), the stupidity of Ada's behavior is presented as a remarkable natural explanation for why, for instance, Ada is criticized by her friends, got fired, etc.

- (18)    Ada   hat   sich   aber   auch   dumm   verhalten!  
           Ada   has   herself   PART   PART   stupidly   behaved  
           ‘But Ada behaved so stupidly!’

These basic ingredients can be fulfilled by questions as well. For instance, in (17a), the discourse situation is of the same kind as in (18). The difference is that the speaker asks for reasons for Ada's stupid behavior. The example in (17b) relates to the following discourse situation: The fact that Ada should not have done anything else is presented as a remarkable natural explanation for why she did what she did. The only peculiarity is that this evaluation of the situation is cast in the form of a rhetorical question.

Let me conclude with the additional observation that *aber auch* is better in exclamatives than in clauses that are subordinate to emotive predicates; see (19).

- (19)    # Ich   bin   überrascht,   dass   Eliud   aber   auch   schnell   ist.  
           I   am   surprised   that   Eliud   PART   PART   fast   is

This also argues against an analysis of exclamative clauses as subordinate to emotives.<sup>4</sup>

## 5 On the interpretation of the attitude in exclamations

It is characteristic of the emotive attitude in exclamations that it is bound to the speaker, to the time, and to the place of the utterance, in short, to its *origo*. This orientation toward the *origo* follows for free from the assumption that exclamations are demonstrations of emotions, as demonstrations are bound to the one who performs them, and to the time and place of the performance; see the deictic nature of speech acts more generally. However, it does not follow for free from the contrary assumption in T&G that exclamations are emotive assertions. The emotive attitude would hinge on a regular predication of a subject, as a consequence of which the emotion could in principle be attributed to any subject at any time and any place. In order to remedy this problem, T&G (p. 28f.) argue that the observed orientation toward the *origo* is rooted in a pragmatic implicature. Specifically, based on Gricean

<sup>4</sup> Based on Oppenrieder (1989), Truckenbrodt (2013: p. 234f.) provides an analogous argument for the distribution of discourse particles in verb-final optatives.

manner and quantity maxims, hearers would interpret an unspecified subject feature [ $\pm$ origo] as the “simplest unmarked [ $+$ origo].” I am not convinced by this explanation for the following reasons.

To begin with, I am unsure about the relevant theoretical underpinnings. Is there independent evidence for the assumption that silent subjects in German bear an unspecified origo feature? Furthermore, subjects in German are not specified for tense. This suggests that the proposal also requires an unspecified origo feature for the verb, which calls for further independent evidence. Finally, I do not understand why [ $+$ origo] is supposed to be simple and unmarked in comparison to [ $-$ origo].

There are also open empirical questions. For one, the orientation of exclamations toward the origo does not behave like an implicature. Specifically, the putative implicature cannot be canceled by an appropriate context; see (20), where A’s second utterance in (20c) should be specified as [ $-$ origo] in light of A’s first utterance in (20a) and B’s reaction in (20b). However, this is completely impossible for the exclamative in (20c).

- (20) a. A: Ich bin nicht überrascht, dass Ada so schnell ist.  
           A: ‘I am not surprised that Ada is so fast.’  
       b. B: Ich hab hingegen gedacht, dass nur Lilli so schnell ist.  
           B: ‘I, however, thought that only Lilli is so fast.’  
       c. (i) A: Ich schließe: Du bist überrascht, dass Ada so schnell ist.  
               A: I conclude you are surprised that Ada so fast is  
               (ii) A: # Ich schließe: Dass Ada so schnell ist!  
                   A: I conclude that Ada so fast is

It is also worth taking a closer look at a context in which the origo of exclamatives shifts systematically, namely, at free indirect discourse (= FID); see Eckardt (2014: Ch. 6) for an extensive discussion based on Rett’s approach to exclamatives. The interpretation of the following example is revealing for our case.

- (21) Adam kam glücklich aus dem Konzert.  
       ‘Adam left the concert happy.’  
       a. Wie sehr ihn Olgas Gesang berührt hatte!  
           how much him Olga’s singing touched had  
           ‘How much Olga’s singing had touched him!’  
       b. Er war überrascht, wie sehr ihn Olgas Gesang berührt hatte.  
           He was surprised how much him Olga’s singing touched had  
           ‘He was surprised at how much Olga’s singing had touched him.’

The exclamative in (21a) supports the interpretation as FID. That is, one interprets the exclamative as if Adam himself expresses his surprise at how Olga’s singing has just

touched him. So the origo shifts to Adam and his time and place despite the use of preterit tenses and 3rd person pronouns. This tension between form and function is the hallmark of FID. Under the assumption that exclamatives are demonstrations of emotions, the observed shift follows from general properties of FID, namely, from the shift of the illocutionary responsibility to a character. The approach in T&G, by contrast, faces a serious challenge here. As the authors assume a silent emotive assertion on top of the subordinate structure, (21a) should be equivalent to (21b). Specifically, if the subject in emotive assertions had an origo feature, it should be shiftable in the given context, regardless of 3rd person pronouns and preterit tenses. However, this is not the case: (21b) differs from (21a) exactly by *not* triggering the effect of reading Adam's mind. Rather, (21b) is interpreted as the narrator's report on Adam's feelings. In addition, this puzzle cannot be solved by assuming an emotive assertion with the 1st person pronoun and present tense; see (22), which cannot convey that Adam is surprised at his time and place because *ich* 'I' and *ihn* 'him' need to refer to different persons.

- (22) Ich bin überrascht, wie sehr ihn Olgas Gesang berührt hatte.  
 I am surprised how much him Olga's singing touched had.  
 'I am surprised at how much Olga's singing had touched him.'

I conclude with a note on the kind of attitude relevant for exclamatives. T&G assume that the relevant predicate presupposes counterexpectation and thus leads to surprise as the relevant attitude. However, according to Rett (2011) and Eckardt (2014), exclamatives rather express that the speaker considers a state of affairs remarkable; see (23) [= Eckardt 2014: Ch. 6, (15), slightly adapted], where the relevant state of affairs is expected by the speaker.

- (23) Wie Du wieder aussiehst!  
 'How you look again!'

From this perspective, surprise is merely the most typical reason for why a state of affairs is considered remarkable. This detail may be pedantic. However, it points to a more general question: why should exclamatives be based precisely on emotive predicates for surprise? If the attitude in exclamatives were rooted in a descriptive emotive predicate, one could expect more variation. For instance, *be happy about* or *be angry about* might be suitable as well. However, these options are not at stake. By contrast, the relevant attitude is abstract, the more so if Rett's and Eckardt's qualification is accepted. This fits better with deriving the attitude from the interaction of given contents with nondescriptive functional properties than from their

interaction with descriptive predicates. Isn't the exclamative accent a fairly intuitive means for marking given contents as remarkable?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A comparison with the written domain might be interesting here. In Bücking (2023), I argue that the exclamation point contributes a lexical operator at the layer of writing acts. Notably, its contribution is rather functional than descriptive. Specifically, it adds the writer's desire for recognition of the writing act in its scope. Furthermore, this attitude is added independently of a specific illocutionary force. The proposal thus sides with the idea that the introduction of attitudes can be parasitic on given acts.