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Challenging exclamations!

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Abstract: This comment on Trotzke and Giannikadou’s target paper entitled “Exclamation, intensity, and emotive assertion” addresses the question as to how the balance between descriptive information and emotional expressivity in sentences like *How hard John works!* and *John works so hard!* is best conceptualized in a proper grammatical-pragmatic framework. Whereas T&G stress the primacy of the descriptive information, the present comment supports an alternative view, in which the expressive aspect of such utterances is ‘upgraded’. In terms of speech acts, T&G consider the utterance of such sentences as assertions, while they are conceived here, in line with tradition, as exclamations. For the proper modelling of the status of the constructions discussed, the importance of a clear distinction between describing and indicating emotions is stressed.

Keywords: emotion; exclamation; assertion; indexicality; speech acts

That’s what they do, the young, thought Campbell. When they hear something funny they say ‘that’s funny’ instead of laughing. Maybe that’s what postmodernism was in the end: the naming of emotion, as opposed to having it (Andrew O’Hagan, *Caledonian Road*, p. 266. London: Faber & Faber 2024).

1 Increased attention for emotion in linguistics

Linguistics has gone through various ‘turns’, pragmatic and cognitive ones, and the question now is whether an emotional turn is on the agenda or should better be avoided. The question is relevant, because in recent years, a ‘rise of affectivism’ has been observed for humanities in general, including the social sciences and psychology (see Dukes et al. 2021), with questions like: What is the role of emotion in human micro-relations and broader social processes, in the functioning of the brain and the body, etc. These are big questions, which will stay on the research agenda of different disciplines for quite some years to come.

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How about linguistics? On the one hand, we see publications which argue that, indeed, linguistics has neglected emotion for too long and that it is time to catch up with the general rise of affectivism; see Foolen (2016), Trotzke and Villalba (eds.) (2021), Schiewer et al. (eds.) (2022–2023), Gutzmann and Turgay (eds.) (to appear), to mention only a few of the recent publications on ‘emotivity’ in language and language use. On the other hand, we encounter authors who warn against too much enthusiasm, against suddenly seeing emotion in language everywhere. Already Sapir (1921: 38) took such a reserved stance: “On the whole, it must be admitted that ideation reigns supreme in language, that volition and emotion come in as distinctly secondary factors.” Wiltschko (2024) provides a good example of a publication written in Sapir’s spirit (indeed, she starts her paper with a quote from Sapir), and I perceive a similar attitude in the target paper by Trotzke and Giannakidou (abbreviated in the rest of this comment as T&G).

It will probably take a while before it has been sorted out how sharp or gentle the affective-emotional turn in future linguistics will have to be. This certainly has to do with the fact that ‘emotion’ itself is a hard to grasp phenomenon. Questions like: What counts as an emotion, should we distinguish between emotions, feelings and affect, can emotions exist in our inner self without being expressed in some way or other, and when expressed, how is that done exactly, nonverbally, and maybe also verbally?

Despite this unstable ground, statements on the language-emotion relation are made, also in the present target paper. Not every aspect of this rich paper can be addressed in this comment. In Section 2, I will summarize T&G’s main claim and in Sections 3 and 4, I will address two aspects that in my opinion should have been taken into consideration more explicitly by the authors, namely speech act classification (Section 3), and the distinction between ‘explicitly stating’ and ‘implicitly indicating’ (Section 4). The quote from O’Hagan’s novel at the beginning of this comment is meant as an illustration of this ‘telling versus showing’ distinction. I will round off with a short concluding Section 5.

2 Trotzke and Giannakidou’s claim

In the literature on exclamative sentences, in English and in other languages, it has been pointed out that they typically come in a variety of forms. T&G focus on *wh*-exclamatives (*How hard John works!*) and declarative exclamations (*John works so hard!*), but they also mention inversion exclamatives: *Does he run fast!* (p. 6). Other authors have listed still other forms. Rosengren (1992), for example, includes sentence types with verbs in specific positions in the German clause: Verb second sentences: *Du bist (aber/vielleicht) gewachsen!* ‘You have (part/part) grown!’, Verb

first sentences: *Bist du (aber/vielleicht) gewachsen!* ‘Have you (part/part) grown!’, and Verb last sentences: *Dass du so gewachsen bist!* ‘That you have grown so much!’. And Finkbeiner (to appear: 338) refers to the so-called Incredulity Response Constructions (IRC) like *Him wear a tuxedo* or German *Larry und Arzt?!* ‘Larry and doctor’ as “[an] other case of expressive sentence type construction.”

Discussing the specific syntactic properties of all these variants in English, German and other languages would take too much space here, but we can observe that marked word order, independent constructions with a dependent form (‘insubordination’), modal particles and the presence of *so* are ingredients that can contribute to making a sentence into one that is ‘felt’ as exclamative.

As speech act theory has made clear, sentence type and illocutionary type do not match one to one. An interrogative question like *Can you pass me the salt?* is often used as a request, etc. At the same time, however, a sentence type has a certain ‘predisposition’ for being used for specific speech acts, it has ‘illocutionary content’ (cf. Rett 2025), or, in the words of Trotzke (2024), syntax is social, i.e. contains clues for speech act interpretation. In the case of the exclamative sentence types listed above, the ‘default’ view is that such sentences are used for realizing the speech act ‘exclamation’, they have exclamatory illocutionary content. As T&G state on p. 4, this view “is shared by almost all of the existing approaches”. They label this view ‘The illocutionary force hypothesis’ (IFH), part of which is the assumption “that there is something like the exclamation speech act”. T&G consider Rett (2011) as a prototypical representative of this view; cf. Rett (2011: 439), who sees “exclamatives as a type of exclamation, a speech act with a unique illocutionary force [which] makes a unique contribution to discourse.” T&G thus chose Rett (2011) as a natural target for their argumentation against the IFH. Opposing the IFH, T&G (p. 5) claim “that the classic exclamation cases *How fast he ran!* and *He was so fast!* are in fact a specific kind of assertion, one that asserts emotion, is veridically committed to the truth of the sentence, and presupposes intensity.” It is not necessary, at this moment, to fully understand every aspect of this claim. Relevant in the present context is the first part, where T&G claim that when such sentences are used, we have to do with “a specific kind of assertion, one that asserts emotion.” Accordingly, T&G consider *wh*-based exclamatives and declarative exclamations as emotive assertions equivalent semantically to sentences with emotive predicates (*be surprised, happy, amazed, disgusted*, etc.) (p. 6), which explicitly assert an emotion.

After phrases like ‘equivalent semantically’ and ‘no difference in meaning’, the reader may be somewhat surprised when confronted with the following statement where rather suddenly non-equivalence is addressed (p. 35): “The difference, therefore, between a regular emotive assertion [*I am surprised, happy* etc., AF] and the *wh*-exclamative is that the latter always expresses a counter-expectation, and we can think of this as *intense* emotivity.” I interpret this passage as saying that

exclamatives like *How hard John works!* and assertions like *It is amazing how hard John works* are basically equivalent, with the only difference that the first one is more ‘intense’ in comparison to the second one, due to the implied counter-expectation. This contextual aspect does, however, in T&G’s view, not turn the assertion into an exclamative speech act.

According to T&G, empirical support for the primacy of the assertion status of *wh*-exclamatives and declarative exclamations can be found in the behavior of such sentences in discourse. My main comments in Sections 3 and 4 do not focus on the empirical part of the paper, so let me summarize and comment on that aspect of the study here in two short paragraphs.

In Section 2.2, T&G show that the descriptive content of all exclamations can be denied, a discourse feature that is typical for assertions. Unfortunately, this claim is not based on corpus data but on experimentally elicited acceptability judgments. Native speakers are asked to read an utterance like *(My,) What delicious desserts John bakes!* and to then produce a denial. Typically, ‘weak denials’ are produced, like *Not really; these are store-bought. John’s actually a terrible cook!*. Note that the denials do not target the *emotive* assertion (the *I am amazed* assertion), which according to earlier passages in the paper is the main assertion. Maybe this emotive assertion is then less ‘at issue’ than claimed by the authors?

Section 2.3 intends to give empirical support for the claim that exclamatives can be used as answers to information-seeking questions, again a typical discourse behavioral feature of assertions. According to T&G, a good answer to a question like *Tell me, how did Eliud Kipchoge do in the race?* would be *My god! How fast he was!*. Here, the authors do not provide experimental acceptability data, let alone examples from corpora. All in all, the empirical strength of Sections 2.2 and 2.3 is tentative and would need further support in future research. In the following sections, I will focus on two primarily theoretical aspects of the target article.

3 The pragmatic function of exclamative sentences

From T&G’s article, one could get the impression that they reject the existence of a speech act class ‘exclamation’. But on p. 19, they say that *Look who came to the party!* “performs an exclamation speech act”. This exclamation interpretation is seen as “a cumulative effect of the initial *look* and the following non-degree *wh*-configuration”. Here, T&G are in line with Villalba (2024), who proposes “a compositional approach to exclamativity”, as the subtitle of his paper reads. But *How hard John works!* and *John*

works so hard! are, apparently, not considered as cases where a compositional approach would be applicable. They don't end up as exclamations but as assertions.

For a proper evaluation of claims like *How hard John works!* is not an exclamation speech act and, in contrast, *Look who came to the party!* is one, an explicit speech act classification would be welcome, including criteria that mediate between sentence type (semantics) and speech act function (pragmatics). T&G do not propose or refer to such a classification, although different proposals are available in the literature on speech acts. Let us take a look at two such proposals from the past.

The classic one is of course Searle's (1976: 1): "The five basic kinds of illocutionary acts are: representatives (or assertives), directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations." Relevant in the present context is, of course, the class of expressives; cf. Searle (1976: 12): "The illocutionary point of this class is to express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content. The paradigms of [e]xpressive verbs are 'thank', 'congratulate', 'apologize', 'condole', 'deplore', and 'welcome'." Remarkably, the verb 'to exclaim' is not listed here. It seems that Searle focused on verbs that can also be used in an explicit performative way ('I hereby X-verb ...'). The fact that *exclaim* can't be used in the 'I hereby X-verb' format, is, in the context of the present discussion, a relevant observation, which we will come back to in Section 4.

Another classification proposal can be found in Rosengren (1992), who distinguishes four classes: *Darstellung* 'description', *Regulierung* 'regulation', *Ausdruck* 'expression', and *Deklaration* 'declaration'. The argumentation for this proposal was developed in Brandt et al. (1992). The first three classes of course evoke a strong association with Bühler's (1934) threefold typology of *Darstellung*, *Appell*, and *Ausdruck*. With the fourth one, *Deklaration*, Brandt et al. (1992) mean the same as Searle with 'declarations', cf. their example (p. 58) *Ich eröffne hiermit die Sitzung* 'I hereby open the meeting'. In contrast to Searle, Brandt et al. (1992) do not distinguish a specific class of commissives. In their view, commissives have to do with regulating future actions, like directives, and are thus considered as belonging to the general speech act class of *Regulierung*.

With regard to the class of *Ausdruck* 'exclamation', Rosengren observes that it cannot be related to a 'dedicated' sentence type. She gives a list of sentence types that can all be used for exclamation, see for a few of them the previous section. Whereas T&G argue that uttering a sentence like *John works so hard!* or *How hard John works!* constitutes an assertive speech act, Rosengren would consider such utterances primarily as exclamations which, secondarily, imply an assertion. Regarding T&G's example sentences, Rosengren would say, I guess, that they *imply* the assertion that John works hard, but that the emotive 'content' of the sentence, indicated by marked word order (in the *wh-exclamative*) or by the word *so* (in the declarative variant), is

not asserted. These features provide the basis for the speech act interpretation that such sentences typically get when they are uttered.

For a proper evaluation of T&G's claim that the sentences under discussion are emotive assertions, it would be necessary that we first agree on a speech act framework, including: (i) a proper classification of speech acts like the ones proposed in Searle (1976) or Rosengren (1992), (ii) a view on the relation between sentence type and illocutionary type. Thus, besides a stronger empirical basis, a more complete pragmatic framework is a second desideratum addressed to the target article.

4 Exclamative sentences are indexical

In his often-quoted unpublished paper, Kaplan (1999) contrasted *oops* versus *I just observed a minor mishap* and *ouch!* versus *I feel pain*. Apparently, there are two ways to communicatively share actual inner states, including emotions, verbally: The descriptive and the, as I call it, indexical-expressive way. In T&G's proposal, this distinction does not play a role. They rather stress the similarities between the two ways of communicating an emotional state, represented by sentences like, on the one hand *How hard John works!* and on the other hand *I am amazed how hard John works*. At a certain abstract level, these may be informationally equivalent, "but they convey it through different modes of expression" (Foolen 2016: 477). The main point I want to make here is that these different modes involve a difference on the level of speech act function. A hearer can react to an *I am amazed x* sentence by saying *I doubt that you are amazed* (adding as an argument for their doubt that the speaker didn't show any visual sign of amazement), thus treating the utterance as an assertion. Such a reaction is not well possible when the first speaker has uttered *How hard John works!* or *John works so hard!*. In those cases, a (weak) denial would pertain to the proposition that John works hard, not to the inner state of the speaker. This inner state is, apparently, not 'at issue'. It is only indicated via features like marked word order and prosody in the first example and *so* and prosody in the second example.

Going through the literature on exclamations, several authors can be found who stress the assertion-exclamation distinction and argue along similar lines as I just indicated. Two examples, an older and a recent one, may illustrate this. For the first one, we can return to Rosengren (1992). In her view, an exclamation involves an evaluation of a deviation from a norm. This evaluation pertains to the propositional content of the utterance (*John works hard*). Crucial for the point to be made here is that "[w]eder die Bewertung noch die Normabweichung (...) dabei lexikalisch ausgedrückt [wird]", 'that neither the evaluation nor the deviation from a norm is lexically expressed' (Rosengren 1992: 301). In other words, "die Normabweichung und die

affektiv-emotionale Einstellung [wird] nicht propositionalisiert” (p. 301), ‘the deviation from the norm and the affective-emotional attitude is not propositionalized’.

Indexicality requires a context, which is needed to find the contextually relevant ‘referent’ of the index. An indexical element typically provides a certain open room for interpretation (a pronoun like *he* or *she* leaves open who exactly is meant), and Rosengren points out that this openness also holds for the indexical aspects of exclamatives; cf. Rosengren (1992: 302, footnote 19): “[E]rst im Kontext [kann] entschieden werden, um welches Gefühl es eigentlich geht”, ‘Only in context can it be decided what emotion is meant in fact’. The range of possible emotions that are candidates for being indicated in an exclamation is broad, cf. in the same footnote: “[M]it Exklamationen (wird) keineswegs immer Erstaunen ausgedrückt (...); es kann sich im Prinzip um die meisten Gefühle handeln, wie Bedauern, Freude, Trauer”, ‘Exclamations do not at all always express surprise; in principle most emotions are candidates for being intended, like regret, joy, sorrow’.

Another, more recent, example of an indexical approach to exclamatives is provided by Visapää (2022), who studies, based on corpus data, a class of independent infinitives in Finnish. The author analyses the independent infinitives in terms of schematic constructions indexing affect and managing interpersonal relations. The author claims that such constructions display affect (p. 521) or “are interpreted as indexes of affect” (p. 526). With ‘affect’, Visapää (2022: 527) refers to “the affective attitude and action that these constructions are indexing in a specific context (e.g., criticism, astonishment).” And on the same page, she adds that “[i]n the terminology of speech act theory, they could be analyzed as speech acts whose illocutionary force is always expressive.”

As Visapää points out, independent infinitives miss grammatical features like person or tense. More generally, ‘ungrounded’ constructions seem well suited for exclamative use, e.g., insubordinated *that*-clauses; cf. Rosengren (1992: 277–281), who examined German “exklamative *dass*-Sätze”, in a time when the label ‘insubordination’ had not been introduced yet. Another example is Callegari (2024) on ‘free conditionals’ in Italian. More descriptive work on such ‘indexical constructions’ would strengthen the perspective supported here.

5 Conclusions

In my comment on T&G’s stimulating paper, I have signaled that their claim that uttering sentences like *How hard John works!* and *John works so hard!* constitute emotive assertions and not exclamations deserves further discussion. The empirical basis could or should be stronger, and a proper evaluation of their proposal is only possible in the context of an explicit theory of speech act classification, which is

missing in the paper. These aspects could be repaired in a later stage of this line of research. But on a more critical level, I have pointed out that there is an alternative approach available, where a fundamentally different perspective on exclamations is taken. In that perspective, the distinction between a descriptive and indexical way of referring to the actual emotions of the speaker is not just considered as a superficial difference but as a semiotically different way of communicating emotions. If these indexical signs have scope over the descriptive content of the utterance, then they also have a dominating impact when it comes to speech act interpretation, leading to exclamation as the understood primary intention of the speaker. The two studies summarized at the end of Section 4 (Rosengren 1992; Visapää 2022), are good illustrations of this approach, which is thus really available and viable. A fundamental discussion about the different views, the one represented by Trotzke and Giannakidou and the one represented by Rosengren and Visapää, is, thus, possible, and should take place in future research on the challenging phenomenon of exclamation, in English, German, Finnish, and other languages.

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