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Exclamatives, try to be a bit more assertive!

Abstract: Trotzke and Giannakidou advance the strong hypothesis that exclamative sentences and exclamations can be reduced to a combination of three basic sentence-types (declaratives, interrogatives, and imperatives) with added intensity for emphasis. Moreover, they give convincing arguments for treating root exclamatives as clauses subordinated to an emotive predicate. In this commentary I briefly evaluate such claims on empirical and theoretical grounds.

Keywords: exclamative; exclamation; assertion; emotive predicates

Since the pioneering work of Dale Elliot (1971, 1974), exclamative sentences have proved to be a hard bullet to bite for syntacticians, semanticists and pragmaticians alike. After more than 50 years, we have not been able to build a clear-cut definition of the exclamative sentence-type, besides the recognition of certain "ingredients" at the syntactic and semantic level (Bosque 2017; Castroviejo 2020; Michaelis 2001; Villalba 2024a) that allow us to account for a limited set of cases, mostly degree wh-exclamatives in Indo-European languages. When it comes to exclamations, the situation is not any better. None of the classic works on speech acts (Austin 1977; Bach and Harnish 1979; Searle 1969, 1979) offer a description of exclamations, except Sadock (1974). It is thus not surprising that the debate on the very existence of an independent exclamative sentence-type or even exclamations has been a matter of much debate in the literature (Castroviejo 2008, d'Avis 2013, 2016; Michaelis 2001; Rett 2011; Rosengren 1992, 1997; Siemund 2015).

    The target article by Andreas Trotzke and Anastasia Giannakidou adds to this debate with a bold claim: there are no exclamative sentence type or exclamation speech acts, just basic sentence types (declaratives, interrogatives, imperatives) with an added emotive emphasis. In their own terms: "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" (p. 5). This is not far from the idea by Guiraud et al. (2011) "to represent expressive speech acts as particular assertive speech acts where the propositional content is about a psychological state", and I must admit that I cannot but feel quite sympathetic to the proposal, for I have defended that the expressive meaning of

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exclamatives is at-issue content (Trotzke and Villalba 2020; Villalba 2017), and that exclamations include both an assertive and an expressive speech act (Villalba 2024b). Moreover, the bet is bold, and irresistible for anyone who has been striving to advance in the jungle of exclamativity. Henceforth, in this commentary I will make the exercise to evaluate how far we can get if we dispense with exclamative sentence-type and exclamation speech acts.

To achieve this goal, I will first consider the consequences of treating exclamatives as assertions plus intensity, highlighting the possibilities of such a move and some challenges that it must face. Then, I will discuss a secondary theoretical issue, namely the treatment of exclamations as inherently embedded structures under an emotive null predicate. Then, I will close the commentary with a short conclusion and general assessment of the paper.

1 Exclamations as assertions

When we talk about the linguistic expression of emotions (Foolen 1997; Scarantino 2017), we have different solutions available:

(1) a. Ouch!
     b. I am in pain.
     c. I am in pain!
     d. What a pain!

Leaving aside terminology disputes, we would typically characterize *Ouch* as a pure subjective linguistic expression of my pain, on a similar stand as a grimace or a sigh. In contrast, we would qualify *I am in pain* as an objective description of the fact that I am in pain, namely a description of an emotion in a similar way that I would describe a physical trait (*I am six feet tall*). This much, almost everybody will probably agree on, but divergent views will collide when we consider (1c) and (1d), for they include not only a description of the fact that I am in pain, as *It hurts*, but also include (part of the) subjective emotion we find in *Ouch!* as well. To my knowledge, this dual nature of exclamations was originally pointed out by Jerrold Sadock (1974: 41; see similar ideas in Sadock and Zwicky 1985: 162; Michaelis 2001: 1040; Krifka 2019):

> It is clear that these exclamations do not have the informative status of assertions. While they commit the speaker to a particular view, they are not used, and cannot be used to inform, enlighten or instruct. In that they are noncontroversial by nature, exclamations of this kind serve a social function. They point up a commonality between speaker and addressee, which, however trivial, helps lay the groundwork for further conversation.

The picture that follows is one in which exclamations are somehow a mixed speech act: on the one hand, they encode descriptive content, just as assertions do, but on the other hand, they also encode the speaker's emotional attitude, just as pure expressives do.

While I feel comfortable with this dual characterization of exclamations (Villalba 2024b), some scholars argue for moving exclamatives to the expressive pole (Castroviejo 2008; Krifka 2019), which sides exclamations in (1c)–(1d) with interjections, rather than with assertions. Such a move has formidable challenges, reviewed in Villalba (2024b), which cannot explain the robust set of evidence that the target article discusses. It is unsurprising, thus, that their authors chose the other option, namely reducing exclamations to a constative speech act, just like assertions. Hence, these two cases are conflated with *It hurts,* while reducing the expressive part to a variety of *intensification*, which was present in previous works by one of the authors under the label emphasis for intensity (Beltrama and Trotzke 2019). I think that this idea suits perfectly exclamative sentences, which have been customarily described as involving some sort of extreme quantification over a scale (Castroviejo 2006; Michaelis 2001; Rett 2011; Zanuttini and Portner 2003). Crucially their proposal bridges the gap between *wh*-exclamatives and exclamations that pervades the literature, offering a promising research line for understanding exclamativity on broader terms, not constrained to a limited set of prototypical cases (degree *wh*-exclamatives) mostly based on Indo-European languages.

1.1 Advantages

One case where the proposal by Trotzke and Giannakidou can be of much profit is that of the infamous "exclamation intonation" (Burnett 2010; Rett and Sturman 2021), a kind of magic wand that converts the sentence it touches into an exclamation. As Huddleston and Pullum (2017: 923) remark "The concept of exclamation is, moreover, a somewhat nebulous one, and it is not possible to present a well-defined set of grammatical constructions that express exclamatory meaning; very often, of course, *it is signalled prosodically rather than, or as well as, by the lexicogrammatical form*" [my emphasis, XV]. Even though the authors explicitly leave intonation aside, one can easily imagine that this intonation is a prosodic correlate of the "attitude of emotion" that can be assigned to the question and imperative exclamations in Trotzke and Giannakidou's (64b) and (64c), respectively. Moreover, the approach can easily explain the fact that in languages where exclamative sentences are typically associated with a particular marker, like Mandarin Chinese, the presence of the marker is not a sufficient condition for being interpreted as exclamative, and the marker may appear in interrogative sentences as well (Badan and Cheng 2015):

(2) a. Tā   fēicháng   cōngming   a!
         s/he   very   intelligent SFP
         'S/he is very intelligent.' NOT: *'How very intelligent s/he is!'
     b. Tā   duō   gāo   (a)?
         s/he   how.much   tall   SFP
         'How tall is she?'

While these facts have been a nightmare for any attempt to build a universal categorization of the exclamative sentence-type, they follow easily from the proposal by Trotzke and Giannakidou.

Another similar case where the target paper may offer us new solutions is covert exclamatives in Spanish (Masullo 2017). This construction is formally a declarative sentence with a suspended final contour, but it is interpreted as a degree wh-exclamative, as Masullo's paraphrases show:

(3) ¡El   tipo   dijo   cada   verdura!
     the   guy   said   each   vegetable
     'What nonsense the guy talked!'

This case will receive a straightforward analysis under the proposal in the target article: we are dealing with wholesale assertions encoded by declarative sentences, but the addition of an emotion intensity yields an exclamation interpretation.

These positive notes also extend to a second major claim of the target article (p. 6):

> Our claim is that (3) [= How fast Eliud Kipchoge was!] and (4) [= I am amazed at how fast Eliud Kipchoge was!] are identical in terms of what they assert and presuppose, and we will group them together under the label 'emotive assertions'. They both assert that the speaker has the emotion of amazement towards the believed proposition that 'Eliud Kipchoge was extremely fast', and presuppose that the speaker has the belief that Eliud Kipchoge was extremely fast.

Assuming that *How fast Eliud Kipchoge was!* is asserting an emotion is not obvious and raises important concerns. Yet, I would like to suggest that this idea might be very helpful for explaining the behavior of tag questions in exclamatives. As remarked by Huddleston and Pullum (2017: 922), exclamatives plainly accept tags with reversed polarity, just as declaratives, but are less natural with constant tags:

(4) a. What a disaster it was, wasn't it!
     b. ?What a disaster it was, was it!

Interestingly, they explain the contrast in terms of the kind of content we are seeking agreement on. Whereas the reversed polarity tag is typically suited for seeking agreement on the speaker's attitude ("Wasn't it noteworthy/surprising?"), the

constant tag seeks agreement on the presupposed proposition ("Was it a disaster?"), which is clearly infelicitous. Hence, this would confirm the claim that we do have the assertion of an emotion.

1.2 Some pending issues

I have shown that the proposal of dissolving exclamations into assertions has an undeniable potential to solve long-standing problems and opening new avenues for research. Nonetheless, as happens with bold and interesting hypotheses, it must face formidable empirical challenges as well. Obviously, to be fair, one cannot expect all problems to be accounted for in a single programmatic article, so my intention here is to highlight some theoretical and empirical aspects of the analysis by Trotzke and Giannakidou that should be given a proper answer in the future.

Let me begin with a victim of their analysis: *Ouch!* and their siblings. The path taken puts *I am in pain.* (1b), *I am in pain!* (1c) and *What a pain!* (1d) into the box of assertions, so we can dispense with exclamations as a speech act ("exclamation characterizes assertions, but also questions and imperatives; it is therefore not a distinct speech act" p. 45). While this might be certainly advantageous on several grounds, as I have suggested above, it leaves us without a proper account for purely expressive acts like *Ouch!* or *Wow!* I don't think that anyone will be happy saying that these utterances are assertions of the speaker's emotion, for there is no propositional content we can resume with an anaphor:

(5)   A: Ouch!/Wow!
      B: #Me too!
      B′:   #Yeah, it is obvious.

Yet, if they are not assertions, what kind of beast are they? In classical speech act terms (see also Unger 2019), these utterances do not seem to have a direction of fit (the hallmark of expressive speech acts), unlike assertions, imperatives or questions. Hence, if we do not have an exclamation speech act, these small particles might be the elephant in the room for the proposal by Trotzke and Giannakidou.

A second problem concerns the idea that exclamative sentences like *How fast Eliud Kipchoge was!* are asserting the speaker's emotion, just as *I am amazed at how fast Eliud Kipchoge was.* If this emotion were asserted, it should be accessible to event

or propositional anaphora. However, whereas it is clearly available for anaphoric resumption in the declarative in (6), it is clearly not in the exclamative in (7):

(6)   A: I am amazed at how fast Eliud Kipchoge was!
           B: Me too!
           B′:   Yeah, it is obvious.

(7)   A: How fast Eliud Kipchoge was!
           B: Me too!
           B′:   Yeah, it is obvious.

Crucially, (7B)–(7B′) can only mean "I am very fast too" and "it is obvious that Eliud Kipchoge was very fast", respectively. This contrast suggests that the propositional content "I am amazed that p" is not accessible in (7), which is certainly unexpected under the assumption that both utterances assert the emotion of the speaker.

As far as I can see, this is not surprising. While it is true that exclamations can be used as indirect responses about the speaker's emotional state, given the proper information structure pattern, they are not used as direct answers, unlike assertions. The correlation uncovered by Trotzke and Villalba (2020) was that "Polar questions can be followed by *that*-exclamatives, and non-polar questions can be followed by both *wh*-exclamatives and declarative exclamations." However, corpus examples are hard to find, and even dialogs fitting into the required pattern are deemed impossible:

(8)   A: You are quite grumpy today, aren't you?
           B: Give me a break, man…
           a.   I have a fucking headache!
           b.   #What a fucking headache I have!
           c.   #That I have a fucking headache!

(9)   A: Hey, Mary, when will you pay my money back?
           B: Give me a break, man…
           a.   I am totally broke!
           b.   #How broke I am!
           c.   #That I am broke!

These examples are not intended to deny that exclamations can be used as responses in some contexts, but they clearly suggest that, if they are just assertions with intensity, we fall short in offering a proper explanation of their poor behavior in information seeking contexts.

Indeed, my impression is that these uses as responses are not particular about exclamatives or exclamations. We know that interrogative sentences are also fine as *indirect* responses. The prototypical case is rhetorical questions (Biezma and Rawlins

2017; Caponigro and Sprouse 2007; Sadock 1974), as in the following examples from Biezma and Rawlins (2017):

(10) a.   PhD student whining a lot about the work she has to do:
           Prof: Are you doing a PhD or vacationing in Konstanz?
      b.   You should stop saying that Luca didn't like the party last night. After all, who was the only one that was still dancing at 3am?
      c.   [B does something very stupid:] A: Are you an idiot?

These rhetorical questions do not expect an answer (albeit they may have one) and are equivalent to assertions. In the literature (e.g. Caponigro and Sprouse 2007; Biezma and Rawlins 2017), it is argued that we do have a real question, but in the context at hand, its contribution *indirectly* updates the common ground as an assertion would do *directly*. In other words, we don't need to collapse both speech acts into one another to explain their similar context-change potential. This rationale can be applied to our exclamatives as responses: they simply make a similar contribution to the common ground (or the question under discussion, if you prefer) as an assertion, but in an *indirect* way, as Trotzke and Villalba (2020) remark. Obviously, this extends to all cases of indirect speech acts: if declaratives, interrogatives or imperatives may encode different speech acts, it is not surprising that exclamatives may too.

As I have remarked above, by raising these issues I am not trying to invalidate the proposal by Trotzke and Giannakidou to analyze exclamatives as assertions, but I would like to suggest that the hypothesis requires some refinements, and a wider set of evidence is needed to evaluate it properly.

2 Exclamatives as subordinated structures

I have considered some strong and weak points of the hypothesis that exclamations are a species of assertions with emotive intensity. Now, I will review the hypothesis that all root exclamative sentences are selected by a null emotive predicate. In Trotzke and Giannakidou's terms (p. 26):

> We therefore submit that the *wh*-exclamative is the complement of a silent declarative main clause containing an emotive predicate (45), and that this declarative, at the level of illocutionary force, is nothing more than an assertion.

This idea is certainly suggestive and offers a very nice explanation of the German and Greek data. Indeed, I would suggest extending it to Romance languages, which

display a similar complementizer in different varieties, e.g., Italian (11a) (Delfitto and Fiorin 2014) and Sardinian (11b) (Jones 1993):[1]

(11) a. Quante   persone   che   hai   incontrato!
          how.many.F.PL   persons   that   have.PRS.1SG   meet.PTPC
          'How many people I have met!'
      b. Itte   bellu   ki   ses!
          what   beautiful that   are
          'How beautiful you are!'

While we lack a complete description of the extent of this phenomenon, the proposal in the text offers us a very plausible answer to the puzzle.

Moreover, the proposal that "it is the combination of the contrary emotive attitude *be surprised* with the extreme SO degree, as we will argue in 3.4, that produces an intensity of emotion otherwise not attested with emotives as a class" (p. 23) can be extended to German non-degree *dass*-exclamatives (*Emotion zu Proposition* 'emotion towards proposition' cases, in Truckenbrodt's (2013) terms), considering the eventive/propositional meaning as part of an expectancy scale. The idea is that, when we use *Dass er gestorben ist!* 'It is surprising that he died', we place the situation denoted on the highest level of the scale of unexpectedness, providing the assertion with the required extreme degree, just as *wh*-exclamatives generally.

This much goes on the positive side. Now, let's consider some challenges that the proposal in the text should face. One obvious concern is the numerous cases of exclamatives restricted to root contexts, as *that*-exclamatives in Romance (Villalba 2003, 2024a; Trotzke and Villalba 2021):

(12) a. (*És   sorprenent)   que   és   ximple   aquest   noi!
          is   amazing   that   is   fool   this   boy
          '(It is amazing) what a fool this boy is!'
      b. (*És   sorprenent)   que   n'és   de   ximple   aquest   noi!
          is   amazing that   CL.PART is   of   fool   this   boy
          '(It is amazing) what a fool this boy is!'

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1 The distinction between *pu* and *oti* is not found in Griko, a Greek variety spoken in Southern Italy, where *pu* is restricted to relatives (also used in Modern Greek), and the form with emotive predicates is always *ka*, borrowed from Romance (Baldissera 2013; cf. Ledgeway 2017):

(i)   Ìme   kuntènto   *pu/ka   vrèchi   sìmmerl.
      am   happy   that/that   rains   today
      'I am happy that today it's raining.'

The fact that these exclamations have no subordinate version in Romance led Trotzke and Villalba (2021) to discard for Catalan the insubordination analysis defended for German *dass*-exclamatives. Under the proposal in the text, we should assume that these cases can be selected by an elided emotive verb not derived from any overt one, a quite undesirable move on theoretical grounds.

A final issue concerns coordination: if *wh* or *that* exclamatives are selected by a null emotive predicate, it should be possible to coordinate them quite easily. However, I am not totally sure that this is always the case. Consider the pair in (13):

(13)   a.   It is amazing how slim Mary is and that she eats so much!
         b.   It is amazing that Mary eats so much and how slim she is!

Six native speakers consulted evaluated (13a) acceptable, and all of them found (13b) worse, ranging from impossible to more or less acceptable. To me, the Catalan version in (14a) is marginal, but the one in (14b) is utterly impossible:

(14)   a.   ??És increïble com de prima està la Maria i que mengi tant.
               'It is amazing how slim Mary is and that she eats so much!'
         b.   *És increïble que la Maria mengi tant i com de prima està.
               'It is amazing that Mary eats so much and how slim she is!'

These contrasts have been associated with sentence-type (mis)match (e.g. Castroviejo (2008: 52) mentions *#I looked at the ceiling and what an extremely tall boy I saw!*), but under the proposal in the target article, where sentence-type is irrelevant, one would expect an homogenous acceptable pattern. More research is necessary, for sure.

Again, as happened with the main hypothesis that exclamations are a species of assertion, the subordinating hypothesis seems also highly promising for giving an answer to long-standing problems and helping us build new research questions. As for the problems pointed out here, time will tell whether they also receive an effective solution.

3 Conclusions

Trotzke and Giannakidou's work represents a remarkable attempt to organize the confused field of exclamatives and exclamations with ingenuity and elegance, so it deserves an in-depth appreciation and a more detailed evaluation than the little exercise I attempted in this commentary. The authors introduce the strong hypothesis that we can explain the set of properties we have been assigning to exclamative sentences and exclamations from a simpler grammar that combines three basic sentence-types (declaratives, interrogatives, and imperatives) with added

intensity for emphasis, and give convincing arguments for treating all exclamatives as clauses subordinated to an emotive predicate.

I am convinced that many ongoing discussions about the place of these constructions in the syntax-semantic interface and in pragmatics will take most of the ideas in this target article as a starting point for new developments, even from the utmost disagreement. This is obviously no small merit, and I am eager to see how the full study of exclamatives and exclamations gets invigorated with these new ideas.

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