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Not all exclamatives behave the same

Abstract: This article challenges the claim that exclamative sentences lack an illocutionary force of exclamation and are semantically equivalent to emotive assertions. Drawing on German data, we show that there are different classes of exclamatives that vary with respect to deniability and do not function well as answers to information-seeking questions but rather serve as replies in discourse. We argue that all the different classes need to be taken into account to arrive at appropriate generalizations for the phenomena under discussion.

Keywords: German syntax; illocutionary force; exclamatives, exclamation; emotive predicates; emotive assertions; deniability; answerhood

1 The claim by Trotzke and Giannakidou

In the introductory section of their target paper, Trotzke and Giannakidou (from now on referred to as TaG) state that "there is no illocutionary force of exclamation" (TaG: 3). They claim that "*wh*-exclamatives are used to perform emotive assertions akin to assertions of declarative sentences containing emotive predicates such as *be amazed, be surprised* in the present tense, and have very similar truth conditions and presuppositions" (TaG: 5). They use the following examples to elaborate their idea:

(1)   How fast Eliud Kipchoge was! (TaG: 5)

(2)   I am amazed at how extremely fast Eliud Kipchoge was. (TaG: 6)

"Our claim is that [(1) and (2)] 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" (TaG: 6).

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2 The argumentation of Trotzke and Giannakidou

To support their idea, TaG argue as follows: "In the literature, we find two central data points that are cited in favor of the claim that exclamations lack assertive force:

(i) the descriptive content of exclamations is said to not be (directly) deniable; and

(ii) exclamatives, unlike declaratives, have been claimed to not be used as answers to information-seeking questions" (TaG: 10).

Their argumentation seems to imply that refuting these two points is a sufficient argument for the claim above.

2.1 Descriptive content of exclamations can be denied

TaG "challenge the ill-formedness of *no* as reported by Rett (2008, 2011) for English, and by Brandner (2010), d'Avis (2016), and others for other languages than English" (TaG: 11).

(3)   A: (My,) What delicious desserts John bakes!
         B: ?No (he doesn't), these are store-bought. John's actually a terrible cook.
         B': Not really; these are store-bought. John's actually a terrible cook.

They justify this claim as follows: "English speakers we consulted find no trouble responding *no* to this sentence […] – so the judgments in [(3)] are quite subtle, to say the least" (TaG: 11) (Examples from Rett 2011: 414).

     To support this point, TaG provide Greek example sentences and reference a study by Trotzke (2019), where German participants were asked to judge whether various exclamative sentences could be denied. The denial was categorized as strong denial (SD: *Nein!*) and weak denial (WD: *Nicht wirklich!*). The following exclamative sentences were tested on 112 participants for SD or WD (Examples from Trotzke 2019: 539).

(4)   Wow!   Peter   kann   so   lecker   kochen!
         wow   Peter   can   so   delicious   cook
         'Wow! Peter can cook so deliciously!'

(5)   Wahnsinn! Was   für   schwierige   Matheaufgaben   Katrin   lösen   kann!
         madness   what for   difficult   math problems   Katrin   solve   can
         'Incredible! What difficult math problems Katrin can solve!'

(6)   Wow! Dass die Maria so schön   aussieht!
        wow that the Maria so beautiful looks
        'Wow! How beautiful Maria looks!'

According to TaG, the study results demonstrate: "Both utterance forms allow denial and prefer the subtle strategy labeled as weak denial" (TaG: 13). Based on these findings, TaG conclude that the descriptive content of exclamatives can be denied.

In what follows, we would like to present our own considerations, confining ourselves to exclamatives in German.

2.2 Our considerations

In German, we can identify three types of exclamatives that behave differently with respect to deniablitiy.

–   The first group consists of declarative exclamatives[1] such as (7).
–   The second group consists of exclamatives that contain an explicitly gradable element such as (8).
–   The third group consists of exclamatives without an explicitly gradable element such as (9).

(7) a. Hat die aber schöne   Haare!
         has she PART beautiful hairs
         'She has such beautiful hair!'
     b. Die hat aber schöne   Haare!
         she has PART beautiful hairs
         'Wow! She has such beautiful hair!'

(8) a. Wie schnell der läuft!
         how fast   he   runs
         'How fast he runs!'
     b. Was der für ein großes Haus   hat!
         what he for a   big   house has
         'What a big house he has!'
     c. Dass der so schnell laufen kann!
         that he   so fast   run   can
         'It's amazing how fast he can run!'

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1 We will not discuss the status of declarative exclamatives here, as it has no bearing on our argumentation.

(9) a. Wen   die   eingeladen hat!
       whom she   invited   has
       'It's amazing whom she invited!'

    b. Dass die den eingeladen hat!
       that she him invited   has
       'It's amazing that she invited him!'

Declarative exclamatives in the first group, such as (7), can be denied without difficulty, either through strong (*Nein!* 'No') or weak (*Nicht wirklich!* 'Not really') denial.

With respect to (8), TaG refer to a study by Trotzke (2019) to argue that exclamative sentences of this kind can be denied as well. In the considerations below, we follow Trotzke's assessment of the 'minor differences' between strong and weak denial in the participants' denial of (8), although we think these differences are more than just minor.

Exclamatives like (8) seem to be deniable only because they include an explicitly scale-indicating element (*groß, schnell*) that can be rejected. If the scale-indicating element is removed from the exclamative sentences of the second group, they can no longer be denied, thus behaving like exclamatives of group three.

(10) a. Wie   der   läuft!
        how   he   runs
        'It's amazing how he runs!'

     b. Was   der für ein Haus   hat!
        what he   for a   house has
        'What a house he has!'

     c. Dass der laufen kann!
        that he   run   can
        'It's amazing that he can run!'

Those exclamative sentences in the third group, such as (9), cannot be denied, neither with strong (#*Nein!* 'No') nor weak (#*Nicht wirklich* 'Not really') denial. The same applies to wh-exclamatives with other *wh*-phrases, like the following.

(11) a. Wo   der   heute   hinschießt!
        where he   today   shoots
        'It's amazing where he's aiming today!'

     b. Welches Kleid die trägt!
        which   dress she wears
        'It's amazing, which dress she wears!'

German examples of the third group are neither discussed in Trotzke's study (2019) nor in TaG. In the 2019 study, only the *wh*-exclamatives and *dass*-exclamatives containing a scale-indicating element were used, already shown in (5) and (6). If these elements (e.g. *schwierig* and *schön*) are removed from (5) and (6), the exclamative sentence can no longer be denied, see (12) and (13).

(12)   Wahnsinn! Was   für   Matheaufgaben   Katrin   lösen   kann!
             madness   what   for   math problems   Katrin   solve   can
             'Incredible! What difficult math problems Katrin can solve!'

(13)   Wow!   Dass   die   Maria   so   aussieht!
             wow   that   she   Maria   so   looks
             'Wow! How beautiful Maria looks!'

Thus, it must be noted that in German, there are exclamative sentences in the third group like (9) till (13) that cannot be denied. Exclamative sentences of the second group can only be denied because they contain an explicitly scale-indicating element. If the element is deleted, they become sentences of group three and can no longer be denied. Since Trotzke's 2019 study does not address exclamatives from the third group and only examines exclamatives containing scale-indicating elements, it only covers a portion of the possible exclamative sentences in German. To show that all German exclamatives can be denied, the third group must also be tested for strong and weak denial. So far, Trotzke has only shown that certain *wie-*, *was-*, and *dass*-exclamatives with explicitly scale-indicating elements can be denied. We do not consider this sufficient to support the claim that "the descriptive content of all exclamations can be denied" (TaG: 10).

2.3 Exclamatives can be used as answers to information-seeking questions

TaG present two arguments against the assumption that exclamatives are unsuitable as answers:
– "[…] the ability to answer a question is not necessarily evidence for assertive force or lack thereof" (TaG: 15).
– "Secondly, while the previous literature has mainly focused on the type of answers, we would like to explore the type of questions instead. When we do that, we find that exclamatives can indeed be used to answer information-seeking questions as long as they do not yield a mismatch at the level of information structure" (TaG: 16).

They support the first point by a short reference to rhetorical questions as an answer and conclude: "The distinct clause type of exclamative does not necessitate a distinct semantic or pragmatic type" (TaG: 16).

To support the second point, TaG introduce a *tell me*-construction as a broad-focus question, like in (14) (TaG: 17).

(14)   A: Tell me, how did Eliud Kipchoge do in the race?
         B: He was very fast!
         B': How fast he was!
         B": Der war aber auch schnell!

TaG conclude: "When the information-structural context is changed to a broad-focus question, we see clear improvement of both the exclamative [(14B')] and the declarative exclamation [(14B")]" (TaG: 17). Additionally, embedded sentences in the correct context are considered excellent answers (TaG: 18).

(15)   A: Tell me, what is the most striking feature about John?
         B: I am amazed that John is extremely tall.

TaG conclude: "Exclamatives can indeed be used as answers to information-seeking questions provided that they occur in a relevant information-structural and discourse environment" (TaG: 18).

As we'll argue below, this is not as straightforward as suggested.

2.4 Our considerations

In their considerations that exclamatives can be used as answers to information-seeking questions, TaG "think of 'answer' as encompassing direct answers to information-seeking questions but also other answering strategies via more indirect moves in a dialogue (e.g., by means of pragmatic inferencing/implicatures[…])" (TaG: 14). Exclamative sentences cannot function as direct answers, as illustrated in (16B').

(16) A: Wie   schnell   war   Eliud   Kipchoge?
          how   fast   was   Eliud   Kipchoge
          'How fast was Eliud Kipchoge?'
     B: Eliud   Kipchoge   war   sehr   schnell.
          Eliud   Kipchoge   was   very   fast
          'Eliud Kipchoge was very fast.'
     B': #Wie   schnell   Eliud   Kipchoge   war!
          how   fast   Eliud   Kipchoge   was
          'How fast Eliud Kipchoge was!'

(16B') is not acceptable as an answer to (16A), whereas (17B) would be a suitable response to the prompt in (17A) (Examples from TaG: 16, translated into German).

(17) A: Erzähl mal, wie schnell war Eliud Kipchoge?
           tell   me   how fast   was Eliud   Kipchoge
           'Tell me, how fast was Eliud Kipchoge?'
      B: Mein Gott, wie schnell der war!
           my   god   how fast   he   was
           'My God, how fast he was!'

Acceptability judgments of responses like (17B) might vary, but the main problem seems to be that it is not obvious in which sense (17A) counts as a question. There are differences between answers to information-seeking questions and other replies in discourse. The phrase *erzähl mal* (*tell me*) opens up a broad narrative range of possible replies. No answer in a narrow sense is required, but varying kinds of narrative responses are possible, which are a different form of reply.

TaG further modify their example, thereby opening for an even broader narrative range that practically allows all kinds of responses.

(18)   A: Tell me, how did Eliud Kipchoge do in the race?
          B: He was very fast!
          B': How fast he was!

(18A) no longer refers to Eliud Kipchoge's speed in a question but is an unspecific request to tell something about how he has been performing. This request can be matched by all sorts of different narratives telling something about Eliud Kipchoge in the race. So, it is no surprise that exclamative sentences like (18B') also seem to work well as do the replies in (19).

(19)   A: Tell me, how did Eliud Kipchoge do in the race?
          B: My god, he won!
          B': He didn't make it to the finish line.
          B'': He didn't look really happy and his shoes were wet.

The narratives work as replies, but it seems questionable to call them 'answers'.

We conclude that the reasons provided by TaG are not sufficient to assume that exclamative sentences can be used as answers to questions, since the shown constructions do not support their argument.

3 The proposal in a nutshell

We suspect that there is also a problem with what is stated "in a nutshell" (TaG: 4) at the beginning. Even if TaG had sufficiently proven that the descriptive content

of *wh*-exclamatives could always be denied and that these could easily serve as answers, this would not prove that the descriptive content of *wh*-exclamatives and assertions with emotive predicates is identical. The following sentence with an emotive predicate (20A) has the descriptive content that the speaker is surprised by whoever *she* refers to. This proposition can be questioned with (20B) to check whether the speaker is surprised.

(20) A: Ich bin überrascht, wie die aussieht!
         I   am   surprised   how she looks
         'I am surprised at how she looks!'
      B: Ist das so? / Ja, wirklich?
         'Is that so?' / 'Yes, really?'

(21) A: Wie die aussieht!
         how she looks
         'I am surprised at how she looks!'
      B: #Ist das so? / #Ja, wirklich?
         'Is that so?' / 'Yes, really?'

The *wh*-exclamative (21A) cannot be questioned in the same way as (20). As discussed above, these exclamative sentences also cannot be denied, because they do not contain a scale-indicating element. To stay close to the discussion by TaG, we examine examples with those elements in (22) and (23).

(22) A: Ich bin überrascht, wie schnell der ist!
         I   am   surprised   how fast   he   is
         'I am surprised how fast he is!'
      B: Ist das so? / Ja, wirklich?
         'Is that so?' / 'Yes, really?'

(23) A: Wie schnell Eliud Kipchoge ist!
         how fast   Eliud Kipchoge is
         'How fast Eliud Kipchoge is!'
      B: Ist das so? / Ja, wirklich?
         'Is that so?' / 'Yes, really?'

(22A) is a sentence with an emotive predicate similarly to (20A). It contains the proposition that the speaker is surprised at how the referent of *she* looks. This proposition can be questioned with (22B). In (23A), we find a scale-indicating element *schnell* (Engl.: *fast*) and this 'verification check' works differently. The reply in (23B) refers to a certain proposition and questions it. But this is not the same proposition as in (22). Questioned is the degree of Eliud Kipchoge's speed, not the speaker's emotion. According to the logic of an identical descriptive content, the 'verification check' should function in the same way.

4 Conclusions

Our considerations of TaG's argumentation show several concerns regarding the claim that exclamative sentences lack their own illocutionary force of exclamation and that the descriptive content is semantically equivalent to complex propositions headed by emotive predicates.

First, the assertion that the descriptive content of exclamatives can always be denied is not sufficiently substantiated. As shown above, there are exclamative sentences in German whose descriptive content cannot be denied, neither strongly nor weakly. Moreover, the examples considered in Trotzke's (2019) study are limited to those with explicitly gradable elements, making it problematic to generalize the findings to all exclamative sentences.

Second, the argument that exclamative sentences can serve as answers to information-seeking questions holds only in expanded narrative contexts. The examples provided by TaG rely primarily on *tell me*-constructions, which allow for a broad range of responses that are rather different sorts of replies, but do not necessarily meet the definition of 'answer'. Based on these considerations, it seems necessary to modify the claim to state that exclamatives can serve as replies to narration-seeking questions.

Finally, our analysis shows that equating the descriptive content of exclamative sentences with emotive predicates is conceptually inconsistent. While sentences with emotive predicates include a propositional statement about the speaker's emotion that can be questioned, this is absent in exclamative sentences. Even in cases where an explicitly gradable element is present, the level of verification differs fundamentally, undermining the claim of identical semantic content.

Our conclusion is that key aspects of TaG's argumentation remain unsubstantiated. To comprehensively support their thesis, further detailed analysis and a broader empirical foundation are necessary.

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