

Where typology meets semantics: The Exclamative as a Universal Speech Act Category (oral)

The purpose of the paper is to explain the prototypical semantico-pragmatic properties of the exclamative speech act and to demonstrate how they motivate the form of exclamative constructions across languages. In the existing literature exclamatives are usually associated with presupposed contents and the expression of extreme degree along a certain scale. Michaelis & Lambrecht (1996) postulate the abstract Exclamative Construction, whose function is to express surprise at the high degree to which a given property has been manifested, with the following semantico-pragmatic content: (a) presupposed open proposition, (b) scalar extent, (c) assertion of affective stance, (d) identifiability of described referents, and (e) deictic anchoring. However I argue that these notions only characterize a certain subclass of exclamatives and therefore are not definitional for the exclamative speech act. First, in many languages degree exclamatives have the same grammatical expression as non-degree exclamatives, which suggests that a notion more structured and more general than ‘scalarity’ is wanted. Second, although exclamatives can sometimes have a presuppositional component, at least one of the putative test cases in the literature in fact rules out the presupposition of their propositional content. I propose that the right category to employ for characterising the relevant act-feature of exclamatives is non-assertoricity, rather than presupposition. This has a morphosyntactic corollary, which has not been given detailed attention in the typological literature: exclamatives frequently employ non-finite forms and nominalisations. That is, cross-linguistically they tend to be expressed by constructions whose primary function is to make reference to an event rather than to assert that an event is taking place or has already done so.

Following Merin (2007), exclamatives are taken to express the abrupt change in the speaker’s expectation, deviating from prior expectation and occasioned by an entity or eventuality. They do so by direct causation, i.e. aiming to cause the addressee to react in sympathy rather than accept an argument or transform the context of joint commitments. That is why exclamatives are not subject to a requirement of backing by evidential or other reason-providing incentives and their content cannot normally be challenged by the addressee. They thus seem to fall outside the classification of major speech act types, which are all either argumentative or otherwise obligation-creating. This semantics allows us to expand the existing typology of exclamative constructions and accounts for the a priori unexpected typological fact, again unexplored so far, that across languages exclamative constructions tend to resemble other constructions devoted to the marking of deviations from expectation. In a number of languages the same grammatical construction (minus prosody) is employed for communicating both exclamations and miratives and/or thetics and/or optatives. I suggest that the observed polysemy is essentially semantic in nature and reflects the conceptual affinity between relevant categories. Roughly, miratives and thetics present eventuality as being outstandingly new and in this epistemic sense unexpected for the speaker. Optatives signal that the current state of the world deviates from the speaker’s expectation. Exclamatives have both of these expressive functions.