

***Wow, this chilli is hot!* Interjections in student grammars of English: a lexical category that is not there.**

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Abstract. The paper examines how interjections have been treated in linguistic literature; on what grounds they have been separated from pure response cries; and what their relation is to iconic (onomatopoeic) vocabulary items. Second, the paper examines various English grammars intended for university level students, especially in second language contexts, to see how their treatment of interjections reflects what is said in linguistic literature. It will be shown that most such grammars ignore interjections almost entirely, which means student learners have very little change of learning about such vocabulary items only based on their grammar books.

1. Introduction

Words in language are divided into lexical categories, also known as word classes or parts of speech. Open classes—nouns, adjectives, and lexical verbs—accept new members, while closed classes, which consist of grammatical or function words such as auxiliaries, articles, conjunctions, pronouns, and prepositions, do not expand easily. Word class membership is determined by the word's formal, functional, and semantic characteristics: words that can have singular and plural forms, function as subjects and objects in a sentence, and refer to people, places, things, ideas or concepts tend to be viewed as nouns, whereas words that inflect for present and past tense, function as the main predicate in a sentence, and signal activities, processes or events are verbs. In many languages, the criteria for open classes are elaborately defined, even if the definitions are not always entirely unproblematic. The same applies to many of the closed classes, even if we find more disagreement regarding the status of individual items; not all grammarians will classify both occurrences of *to* in *We want to escape to the country* as prepositions, for example. It is not unusual for languages to also have word classes that serve almost as rubbish bins, in the sense that their members are defined mainly based on properties they do *not* have, that is, by means of the absence of properties that would place them in the other classes. Adverbs are a well-known case in point: it is widely accepted in linguistic literature that there are no formal, functional, and/or semantic criteria that would

capture all, or even most, members of this class. Despite the complications, adverbs are in most accounts still placed among the open classes and are seen as constituting a category of their own.

While the word class status of adverbs has been discussed in some detail in the literature, the same cannot be said of interjections which, in the words of Ameka (1992a), constitute another “universal yet neglected part of speech”. The purpose of this paper is to look at one specific aspect of this topic, namely how interjections, in the sense of a lexical category (or not), have been defined in linguistic literature; if and on what grounds they have been separated from pure response cries; and what their relation is to iconic (mainly in the sense of onomatopoeic) vocabulary items. Second, the paper will investigate various English grammar books, to see how their treatment of interjections reflects what is said in linguistic literature. The focus will be on grammar books that have uses in second language teaching and learning contexts, such as English language and grammar classes at university. It will be shown that many such grammars are not of much help, if the aim is to learn anything about interjections in English. The paper is structured as follows: section 2 provides an overview of previous, more linguistic-y work on interjections, both in English and other languages. Section 3 examines the treatment of interjections in English grammar books that are used in second language contexts. Section 4 summarizes the main findings.

2. What is an interjection?

According to the *SiL Glossary of Linguistic Terms*, an interjection is “a form, typically brief, such as one syllable or word, which is used most often as an exclamation or part of an exclamation” (interjection, 2021). Interjections are said to express emotional reactions, be syntactically independent, and often contain speech sounds that are not otherwise part of the language. Although interjections are frequent in all languages, there are few accounts focusing on their specific forms, meanings, syntactic properties, and discourse functions. Partially this may be the result of their close affinity to sounds of the human body: it is not easy to decide if *ouch*, *eek* and *oh* are words with conventionalized meanings and linguistic functions, or if they are sounds that can be produced by the human articulatory organs, along with sounds like burping, sneezing, and coughing that serve no function in language. According to Müller (1862, p 366), interjections are “in the outskirts of language” and “language begins where interjections end”.

As discussed in e.g. Ameka (1992a), interjections were recognized as part of language—a subclass of adverbs—already in ancient Greek. Latin grammarians viewed interjections as an independent word class. As Latin interjections typically formed utterances on their own, the class was named *interjections* where the constituents *inter* ‘between, in the middle of’ and *iacēre* ‘to throw, to cast’ (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.) were intended as characterizations of this behaviour. Latin interjections were mainly seen as signifiers of emotions that, although recognized as an independent word class, often lacked fixed forms (Ameka, 1992a). This line of reasoning, as the quote from the *SiL Glossary* shows, is still dominant in the descriptions of interjections that exist in present-day linguistics: interjections are expressions of feelings and states of mind, and they are assumed to form syntactically independent utterances.

Jespersen (1924) has questioned the view of interjections as an independent word class and pointed out that the only common denominator between words that can only be interjections and words “from the ordinary language e.g. *Well! Why? ... Nonsense!*” is that they can form utterances on their own (p 90). The former type of items could be classified as particles, Jespersen (1924) argues, while items like *Nonsense!* should be seen as members of their “normal” classes. Bloomfield (1933) does not question the word class status of interjections but proposes that the class be divided into two subclasses: one subclass consists of single words like *ouch*, *oh*, *gosh*, and *hello*, while the other one, called *secondary interjections*, consists of phrases and fixed expressions of the type *oh dear*, *dear me*, and *goodness gracious* (p 176ff). Irrespective of their form, Bloomfield continues, interjections function as what he calls *minor sentences*. The distinction between interjections as a word class and exclamatives as a sentence or utterance type is an important one to bear in mind—even Ameka (1992a) has emphasized that the term *interjection* refers to a word class and should not be “used confusingly to describe utterance types” (p 111)—as it is an issue where many present-day grammars of English fall short, as we will soon see.

2.1 Primary and secondary interjections—and possible complications.

Ameka (1992a) distinguishes between vocabulary items like *ouch*, *oh*, *gosh* and so on that can only be interjections, and vocabulary items that can also be members of other word classes. The former are called *primary interjections*, the latter *secondary interjections* (i.e., Bloomfield and Ameka use this term differently). Primary interjections, Ameka (1992a) proposes, form utterances on their own, even if some of them can be loosely connected to a sentence, as in the case of *Gee, you look like you had it!* from Ameka (1992a, p 105). Secondary interjections,

such as *amazing*, *fine*, *shit*, and *bollocks*, Ameka (1992a) further proposes, should be classified as interjections only when they form an utterance on their own and are used as expressions of emotions and mental states. In such situations, their literal meanings are of less importance. The difference is easy to see if we compare *Bollocks! You can think about it for as long as you like.* (from COCA: 1999, FIC) to *You wouldn't know the right thing if it kicked you in the bollocks, Charlie.* (from COCA: 2017, TV). In the first example *bollocks* is an interjection expressing the speaker's frustration, regret, and/or annoyance (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.), while in the second example it is a noun that identifies a referent, albeit in somewhat sub-standard fashion. Like his predecessors, Ameka (1992a) observes that primary interjections can often contain speech sounds that are not used in the more "ordinary" words: the interjection spelled as *tut-tut!* in British English and *tsk! tsk!* in American English is usually visioned as a series of dental clicks, for example, although such sounds are not part of the phoneme inventory of standard English on either side of the Atlantic. The tendency to contain exceptional speech sounds is not a reliable criterion for identifying primary interjections, however, as there are other types of words—such as loan words and many onomatopoeic words—that can also contain such sounds.

Although Ameka's distinction between primary and secondary interjections is a useful tool, it overlooks the fact that many primary interjections can be members of other words classes as well. When this happens, the items can combine with inflectional and derivational affixes—another property of primary interjections that, according to Ameka (1992a), separates them from secondary interjections and from other word classes—and be integrated in sentences, even if the sentences seem then to belong mainly to informal language domains. Examples of such situations are provided in (1)-(6), all of which are examples of real language use.

- 1) This made the health visitor start coughing as well as tutting. (COCA: 2003, FIC)
- 2) I can imagine in my experience is being an atheist, surrounded by lots of tutting Christians! (COCA: 2012, WEB)
- 3) All the sanctimonious tut tutting about his naughty, wildly wonderful, totally unorthodox political incorrectness misses that [...] (COCA; 2012, WEB)
- 4) She supports it herself and loves that child like crazy but so many people tsk tsk her and tell her that she was selfish. (COCA: 2012, BLOG)
- 5) Yet still he turns up to' tsk tsk tsk' everybody for not being horrified that Egyptians are mighty pissed off about [...] (COCA: 2012, BLOG)

- 6) When you two have finished oohing and aahing over the toy, me and Mrs. Yorn need to get ready. (COCA: 2010, TV)

In (1)-(6) the words *tutting*, *oohing* and so on are not used as responses to something that is present or occurs in the same speech situation. Instead, the sentences describe situations *involving* such responses or reactions. Hence, the words *tut*, *ooh* and so on are unlikely to be interjections, but instead meet the criteria for iconic words, in the sense of words that sound like what they mean.

The idea of interjections as a subtype of iconic—in the sense of onomatopoeic—words is not new in linguistic literature. For example Sapir (1921) treats “conventional interjections” like *oh*, *ah* and *sh* as being separate from “instinctive cries” for pain, surprise, and so on, and proposes that they should be seen as parts of language “in the properly cultural sense of the term” (p 2). Although interjections may seem to mimic instinctive cries this is, Sapir (1921) argues, done in a similar fashion as to when onomatopoeic words like *cuckoo* mimic the “cries of the birds they denote” (p 2). More recent work on iconicity and onomatopoeia rejects the view of interjections as iconic words. One argument for this is, according to Ameka (1992a, p 113), that interjections are reactive and expressive, not imitative and depictive, in nature. More specifically, while iconic words are understood as depictions of sensory imagery—which means onomatopes are depictions of imagery of sound and/or objects or movement that cause the sound—interjections are expressions of mental states that are uttered as responses to something that is present or takes place in the same speech situation. This has led Dingemanse (2009) to propose that interjections are indexical, rather than iconic, in a Peircian system of signs. Being indexes, Dingemanse continues, interjections are tied to the speech situations where they are uttered; iconic words, on the other hand, can be displaced more freely of the entity or event that they imitate.

If the line of reasoning pursued above is on the right track, examples like (1)-(6) can be taken to suggest that Ameka’s primary interjections can be converted to iconic verbs, adjectives and nouns in sentences that report or describe an event. In other words, *tut*, *tsk*, and so on are not interjections in (1)-(6), the way they are in (7)-(8), for example.

- 7) Okay. Geez. Can't believe your house. Tut tut. (COCA: 2017, MOV)
8) Such idiocy, from people who think they are so smart. tsk tsk. (COCA: 2012, BLOG)

The downside of this is, of course, that Ameka's (1992a) primary interjections end up being very similar to secondary interjections: members of both groups can have interjection and non-interjection uses (i.e., be classified as interjections and as members of other word classes; see also e.g. Wierzbicka, 1992; Padilla Cruz, 2017). The difference between the items seems then to be that primary interjections that have been turned into members of other word classes often qualify as iconic words, while secondary interjections, such as Ameka's examples of adjectives and nouns like *amazing*, *fine*, *shit*, and *bollocks*, are arbitrary and denotative in nature, when they are members of their "normal" word classes.

Another question that arises—and is also part of the above quotation from Sapir (1921)—is the status of interjections as part of language proper. In view of how interjections are presented as expressions of emotions and as reactions to something that is present in the speech situation, what separates them from pure response cries? Why should *ouch* be an expression of emotion, and hence a word, rather than just a spontaneous cry of pain?

2.2. Interjections are not pure response cries.

The distinction between interjections as part of language and pure response cries has been addressed in Goffman (1978). Goffman's original article covers various aspects of what he calls *self-talk*; many primary and secondary interjections can be seen as examples of self-talk, as uttering them need not have a specific audience in mind, and they may instead be directed by the speakers to themselves. Even if Goffman (1978) uses the term *response cry* for items like *oops*, *ahh*, *phew*, and so on, they are still assumed to differ from "pure" response cries in the sense of spontaneous cries for pain and sounds of the body, such as coughing and burping: response cries that are part of self-talk—and can hence be seen as part of language proper—tend to have identifiable functions so that *oops* is often associated with aspects of surprise, for example, and there are differences between languages in what items are associated with what functions. "Pure" response cries in the sense of sounds produced by the human articulatory organs do not vary between languages: coughing and burping will sound the same and are identifiable as "just" coughing or burping, irrespective of what language one speaks.

2.3. Discourse functions of interjections.

Assuming that interjections form an independent word class whose members are associated with specifiable meanings and which can form utterances on their own, the last questions that will be addressed here are what *kind* of meanings interjections are associated with, and how

the meaning determines their function. Put differently, what information are interjections used to communicate in speech situations? Ameka (1992a, p 113; 1992b), following the line of reasoning pursued in Wierzbicka (1992), see also Goddard (2014) and Dingemanse (to appear), has proposed a three-way distinction between expressive, conative, and phatic interjections that is based on their communicative function. The first subtype, expressive interjections, consists of items that serve to communicate the *speaker's* emotions or cognition. Emotive expressive interjections include items like *Yuck!* and *Wow!* that signal the speaker's feelings of (in this case) disgust and surprise. Cognitive expressive interjections are, in turn, items such as *Aha!* that reveal something about the speaker's knowledge and thoughts at the time of utterance—the item *aha* serves to express 'triumph, satisfaction, realization, discovery, or (now rarely) mockery or irony' (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.) that are attributed to the speaker or the person who utters the interjection. According to Ameka (1992b) and Wierzbicka (1992, p 165f) emotive interjections can often be paraphrased with 'I feel something' while cognitive interjections are often paraphrasable with 'I know something'.

The second subtype in Ameka's (1992a; 1992b) classification, conative interjections, consists of items that are directed by the speaker to the addressee. Their role can be to get the addressee's attention, as in the case of utterances like *Hey!* or *Yo!*, or to bring about some reaction, such as to urge the addressee to be quiet (*Shh!*) or make them repeat or explain something (*Eh? Huh?*). In Wierzbicka (1992, p 165f) these are labelled *volitive interjection* that are paraphrasable with 'I want something'.

The third subtype, phatic interjections, for example *uhhuh*, *mmm* and (repetition of) *yeah*, are used to establish and maintain communicative content in a conversation. This means they are tools for back-channeling and feedback signaling; see Ameka (1992a; 1992b), Norrick (2009) and Dingemanse (to appear) for more discussion. It is worth noting that this function is not brought up in most other sources that discuss interjections. Even intuitively these items seem to be different from items that qualify as expressive and conative interjections. First, they clearly do not qualify as expressions of emotions, which is the common denominator for the other subtypes of interjections. Second, they are not "outcries" the way other interjections often are, but are instead uttered more softly, so as not to interfere, which in turn means that they cannot usually be followed by an exclamation point in written language. Even if they are directed by the speaker to the addressee as instructions for them to continue speaking, they are not direct demands in the same way as conative interjections often are. In many cases, phatic interjections seem to be similar to discourse particles and connectives like *so*, *and*, *or*, *but*, and

serve to initiate turns in conversations; see e.g. Wierzbicka (1992), Norrick (2009), and Dingemanse (to appear).

After this brief overview of interjections in previous work, we will move on to look at grammar book's accounts of the topic.

3. Treatment of interjections in English grammar books

Interjections, along with adjectives, adverbs, articles, conjunctions, nouns, prepositions, pronouns and verbs, have been part of English grammar description for hundreds of years; see e.g. Hollman (2020) for an overview. The status of interjections as an independent class in “traditionalist” grammars mirrors their status as a word class in Latin—a logic that is known to have affected the grammar description of a range of languages. Many early accounts of English viewed interjections, in parallel to Latin, as items that express “passyons and the affections” of speakers (Palsgrave, 1530, as cited in the OED). Many early grammarians also adopted the imagery of interjections as being “*interjected*, or ‘thrown into the midst of something else ; and this something else is the sentence, as made up of the other parts of speech” (Whitney, 1877, p 19). Whitney’s (1877) grammar is exceptional in that it devotes two full pages—which is two pages more than in most other grammars of English—to interjections. Although interjections are viewed as items that express “a number of different feelings—such as joy, pain, surprise, disgust [...]” they are separated from pure response cries that are seen as “real natural outbursts of feeling, like a scream, a groan, a sigh [...]” (Whitney, 1877, p 152). In addition to “ordinary” interjections of the type *oh!*, *fudge!* and *dear me!* Whitney places various onomatopoeic words such as *bow-wow!* and *ding-dong!* in this class—a decision that is not entirely unproblematic, as we have already seen. Whitney also observes that English has many “ordinary words, real parts of speech, [that] are so much used in this exclamatory way that they are almost to be called interjections” (1877, p 153). Such words include, in his grammar, items like *how*, *why*, *what*, *well* and *indeed*. Jespersen (1922) characterizes interjections as “abrupt expressions for sudden sensations and emotions” that are “isolated in relation to the speech material used in the rest of language” (p 415). In line with Whitney (1877), he distinguishes between items that only function as interjections, and items that can be other type of words as well. A similar line of reasoning is pursued in Zandvoort (1948) who defines an interjection as a “natural ejaculation viewed as part of speech” (p 224). Zandvoort separates what he calls *regular interjections* such as *Oh!*, *Ha!*, *Hey!*, *Aha!*, *Oho!* and *Alas!* that

can only be interjections from “occasional” interjections such as *Damn!*, *Dear me!*, *Dear, dear!*, *(Good) Lord!*, *(Good) heavens!*, *By Jove!* and *Nonsense!* that can belong to other classes as well and have the form of fixed phrasal expressions (1948, p 224). Schibsbye (1965, p 289) has observed, in line with his predecessors, that some English interjections can “contain sounds that are not found in ordinary words, e.g. ugh /u:x/, tut (the alveolar click). They are independent elements of the utterance, not related syntactically to other parts of the sentence, but parenthetical insertions which as to content vaguely correspond to a full sentence.”

Even if English grammar writers’ views of word classes and how they are defined have changed since the days of yore, the idea of interjections as expressions of emotions and cognitive states and as consisting **(i)** of items that can only be interjections and form utterances on their own, and **(ii)** of items that can belong to other word classes as well have remained central. What varies is how the second type of items are analyzed: are they interjections, or are they something else, where the something else often means that they are treated as clauses or sentence fragments of some kind.

A rather common strategy in the more recent grammar books aimed at university level students of English is to ignore interjections entirely or to only mention them in passing, in for example the index or a possible glossary where the reader is instructed to look up terms like *exclamative* instead. Sources where the term *interjection* is not mentioned include Downing & Locke’s (2006) *English Grammar. A University Course*. Items that Zandvoort (1948) would have classified as occasional interjections and Ameka (1992a) as secondary interjections—so, single words like *Amazing!* and *Rubbish!* from Downing & Locke (2006, p 200); see the examples in (9)-(13) below—are instead said to be “verbless clauses” that have the function of “clausal exclamatives”.

- 9) What an idiot he is!
- 10) You must be joking!
- 11) What an idiot!
- 12) Amazing!
- 13) Rubbish!

While the view of single words as clauses may have its origins in the idea that the words are “parenthetical insertions” that “vaguely correspond to a full sentence” (Schibsbye, 1965, p 289), it leaves the grammar user in a situation where items like *Wow!* in (14)-(15) may not be treated

as part of (the grammar description of) the language, while single word items like *Amazing!* that carry the same meaning and function are presented as clauses.

14) Wow! Amazing! Gary misses by 31! Only 31! (COCA: 1990, NEWS)

15) I am the Elder of Ultimate Bliss and my name is Lee Changchun. Wow... amazing. You're so ignorant, kid. (COCA: 2011: MOV)

The question that many students have—in my own classes at least—in view of claims such as this is if anything followed by an exclamation point is then a clause. A further problem is that it is not easy for learners to see, and for teachers to explain, how a “verbless clause” of the type *Amazing!* differs from sentence fragments created by true ellipsis.

In Berry's (2018) *English Grammar. A Resource Book for Students*, all the other “traditionalist” word classes are covered in some detail and with plenty of examples and the type of problematizations that can be expected of a grammar intended for university level students. The label *interjection* is mentioned once, under the headline *Problems with word classes*, as an example, along with numerals, of a class that “we are not sure about” (p 80). Otherwise, Berry discusses exclamation points—in eight lines of text—that have the form of clauses or sentences of the type *What a nice day it is!* (2018, p 124) in his grammar. In other words, Berry (2018) does not bring up the status of single words like *Amazing!* as interjections or as clauses at all. A somewhat similar approach is adopted in Börjars & Burridge's (2019) *Introducing English Grammar* which does not mention the term *interjection* at all. The discussion of exclamation points, although considerably longer than in Berry (2018), covers exclamation points as a sentence type that have the form of mainly *what* and *how*-phrases or clauses. Although Börjars & Burridge (2019) observe that “exclamatory meaning can also be expressed by using intensifying words like *wow, the hell, surely, so, such*, and so on” (p 131) the term *interjection* is not brought up or commented on in this connection either. The *Collins Cobuild English Grammar* (Sinclair, 2005) lists the term *interjection* in the index, where the reader is instructed to look up exclamation points. The discussion of exclamation points takes place in a section on information structure where they are defined as “words and structures that express something emphatically” (Sinclair, 2005, p 431). Such words and structures are viewed as the speaker's “reaction to something that [they] are experiencing and looking at” and the grammar distinguishes further between “exclamation points that are only used to show reactions” and “other clause elements or clauses [that] can be used as exclamation points” (Sinclair, 2005, p 431f). The first group includes both single words and phrases of the type *aha, gosh, oops, wow, good*

heavens, *goodness me* and *really* that in Ameka (1992a) would be seen as both primary and secondary interjections. The second group includes both single words such as *Nonsense* and *Lovely* that Ameka (1992a) would treat as secondary interjections, as well as various *what* and *how*-phrases or clauses. In Estling Vannestål's (2007) *A University Grammar of English with a Swedish Perspective*, yet another grammar book intended for university level students, interjections are presented as being "a strange little group, comprising various words and sounds used as exclamations [...] such as Ouch!, Wow! and Holy smoke!" The author notes that an interjection "does not belong to a clause, but occurs separately" and concludes by saying that "we will not deal with them further in this book" (p 56).

A common denominator in the grammars discussed so far is that interjections are mentioned in passing, if at all, and the authors often fail to, or choose not to, separate between interjections as a word class and exclamatives as a sentence or utterance type. Another common denominator is that the relation between interjections and pure response cries remains vague: none of the works reviewed above address this issue, even if some of them imply that interjections are words and hence part of language proper. Some of them imply quite the opposite, however, by stating that interjections are "sounds" (Estling Vannestål, 2007, p 56). There is also no systematic distinction between primary and secondary interjections, that is, between items that are most commonly interjections and items like *Amazing!* that are either interjections or members of other word classes. Finally, although most of the grammars bring up exclamatives as a sentence or utterance type, few of them explain to the reader what kind of meanings they are associated with and what communicative functions they serve. All the examples brought up in the grammars qualify as either expressive or conative interjections, and none are of the phatic subtype.

The grammar books we have examined above are independent publications. There are also various grammars intended for university students that are based on more comprehensive descriptive grammars targeting not only students but also their teachers and other researchers. The first example is the set of grammar books based on Quirk et al.'s *A Grammar of Contemporary English* (Quirk et al., 1973) and *The Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Quirk et al., 1985). It is not unreasonable to expect that, if interjections are mentioned at all in the student-oriented grammars, the story that is told will be in line with the story told in the big grammars. Hence, it will make sense to start by looking at the big grammars and then comment on a selection of the spinoffs. In Quirk et al. (1973, p 413f), interjections are viewed as "purely emotive words which have no referential content" and which have "phonological features which lie outside the regular system of language". Quirk et al. (1985, p

74) characterize interjections as “grammatically peripheral, in the sense that they do not enter into constructions with other word classes, and are only loosely connected to sentences with which they may be orthographically or phonologically associated”. Further, Quirk et al (1985, p 74) propose that “interjections form a relatively open class because they can be rather freely created by onomatopoeia”.

Being comprehensive descriptive grammars, Quirk et al. (1973; 1985) also specify the type of meanings and communicative functions that interjections may have. Quirk et al.’s (1973, p 414) examples, such as *Oh* (surprise), *Ah* (satisfaction, recognition), *Oho* (jubilant surprise), *Ooh* (pleasure, pain), *Hey* (call for attention) and *Eh?* (impolite request for repetition), are in line with the discussions of emotive and conative interjections in Ameka (1992a; 1992b), Wierzbicka (1992) and Dingemanse (to appear), even if the reader might wonder why *Oh* should be an expression of surprise, when the form *Ooh* is an expression of pleasure and/or pain. Wierzbicka (1992) has proposed that some forms might serve almost as ‘general purpose’ interjections; the Yiddish *oy* has been classified as an expression of 29 emotions, for examples. Another point worth making is that there is no consensus regarding the spelling of (especially primary) interjections: adding more o’s—*Oh*, *Ooh*, *Oooooh*, and so on—may or may not reveal something about the intended meaning and function of the item. The final point worth making, before moving on, is that the lists of possible interjections provided in Quirk et al (1973; 1985) only contain what Ameka (1992a) would treat as primary interjections. Single words that can be interjections or belong to other word classes—for example *Amazing!* and *Excellent!* that in Ameka (1992a) would be secondary interjections—are instead analyzed as “exclamatory adjective sentences”; see Quirk et al. (1973, p 258). This means that data like (14)-(15) would be analyzed as containing an interjection expressing jubilant surprise (*Wow!*) and an “adjective sentence” (*Amazing!*) that expresses the same meaning. Whether this makes sense to a student learner is anyone’s guess.

The student grammars examined here that are based on Quirk et al.’s (1973; 1985) big grammars are Leech & Svartvik’s (1975) *A Communicative Grammar of English*, Greenbaum & Quirk’s (1990) *A Student’s Grammar of the English Language* and Nelson & Greenbaum’s (2016) *An Introduction to English Grammar*. In Leech & Svartvik (1975) interjections are placed in what the authors call *minor words classes*, which is their term for closed word classes (p 307)—in *The Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Quirk et al., 1985, p 74) the same authors argue that interjections are an open word class. Another difference between the big grammars and Leech & Svartvik (1975) is that the latter does not present interjections as forming utterances on their own. All the examples provided—all of which are of the type

Ameka (1992a) would treat as primary interjections—are loosely connected to a sentence, as in *Ah, that's just what I wanted!* from Leech & Svartvik (1975, p 134). The authors are careful in separating interjections from exclamations. Although exclamations are also said to express emotions, they are presented as having the form of noun phrases and adjective phrases—so, not adjective *sentences*, as in the big grammar—formed with *what* and *how* (Leech & Svartvik, 1975, p 134).

Greenbaum & Quirk's (1990) student grammar is much less informative than Leech & Svartvik (1975): interjections are mentioned only once, in a note on block language. The authors argue that “interjections are purely emotive words which do not enter into syntactic relations” and list items like *Ah, Boo, Oh, Ouch, Sh* and *Wow* as examples (p 246). As we can see, all of these are what Ameka (1992a) would treat as primary interjections. Like the big grammar, but contra Leech & Svartvik (1975), Greenbaum & Quirk (1990, p 141) treat single words like *Excellent!* and *Wonderful!* as “exclamatory adjective clauses”. Otherwise exclamatives are seen as having the form of *what* and *how*-phrases and clauses, which is in line with what Leech & Svartvik (1975) also say.

The last of the three spinoffs discussed here, Nelson & Greenbaum's (2016) introductory grammar, turns out to live up to its title, when it comes to interjections. The term is mentioned once, in a chapter on punctuation where interjections are brought up as an example of items that are separated from the rest of the sentence by commas (p 258). To be able to follow this punctuation rule, the student will already need to know what an interjection is—knowledge that they are clearly expected to have gained from elsewhere. The parts of the grammar that focus on exclamatives do not help, as they focus entirely on *what* and *how*-phrases; this means that single word “adjective clauses” of the type *Amazing!* that are mentioned in the other student grammars are not brought up at all by Nelson & Greenbaum (2016).

Let us now turn to two more recent descriptive grammars and their respective spinoffs, namely Biber et al.'s (1999) *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* and Huddleston & Pullum's (2002) *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. Biber et al. (1999) bring up interjections in several places and discuss them from various viewpoints. The discussions begin with the statement that, because “interjectional” behaviour can be displayed by both traditional interjections and by words that belong to various other classes, the authors will use the term *insert* as cover term for all the different forms. Inserts are said to display properties of both open and closed word classes, depending on the items in question: some subgroups, such as greetings and response words like *Yes* and *No* are relatively closed in nature, while others allow new items to be created relatively freely (Biber et al., 1999, p 56f, p 1085).

The more open subgroups often contain “traditional interjections” like *whoopee*, *wowie*, and *yuck*. Although all inserts are defined as items that have “an exclamatory function, expressive of the speaker’s emotion” (Biber et al., 1999, p 56, p 1083), the authors distinguish between items that most typically function as emotive and conative interjections, and items that are possible as phatic interjections, in the sense of Ameka (1992a; 1992b) and Wierzbicka (1992). Inserts like *Ouch* and *Oh dear* are said to be “traditional interjections” without explaining what that actually means, while other inserts are common as greetings (*Hi! Hello! Bye!*); as attention signals (*Hey!*); as response elicitors (*Okay?*), and/or as responses to what is said (*Yeah. Alright*)—see Biber et al. (1999, p 93f; p 1083ff) for more examples and discussion. Biber et al. (1999) also observe that some items that are viewed as emotive interjections, for example *Oh*, may commonly function discourse markers that introduce utterances or initiate responses to someone else’s utterance (p 1083f). In other words, in addition to being a primary emotive interjection, *oh* can be a phatic interjection, especially when it occurs with *and*, *well*, *yeah*, and so on. As an important aim of Biber et al.’s grammar is to describe the frequencies of words, phrases and sentences, including their functions, it is worth noting that phatic interjections, especially the items *yeah*, *no*, *mm* and *okay* are the most commonly occurring interjections in English—see Biber et al. (1999, p 1096); see also Norrick (2009). *Oh* is the most commonly occurring emotive interjection in both British and American English. In British English, *Oh* is followed by *ah*, *ooh*, *ha* while American English speakers prefer *wow* and *aargh* (Biber et al. 1999, p 1083ff; p 1095ff). Ameka’s (1992a; 1992b) conative interjections (*hey*, *huh*) are more frequent in American English than British English.

The student version of Biber et al.’s big grammar—*The Longman student grammar of spoken and written English* by Biber et al. (2002)—presents very much the same story. The account is nearly five pages long, and interjections are defined as a subtype of inserts and as words that have an exclamatory function (Biber et al., 2002, p 450). Other inserts listed include greetings, discourse markers (*well*), individual words like *right* that initiate turns, swearwords, various attention and response getters (*hey!*, *right?*) and other words and expressions that serve specifiable functions in conversation (*mmm*, *uh*, *geez*). This makes Biber et al (2002) the only student grammar that covers all three functions of interjections—even if they use the umbrella term *insert*—identified in e.g. Ameka (1992a; 1992b) and Wierzbicka (1992).

In view of how much information Biber et al. (1999; 2002) present on interjections / inserts, it is surprising to find that the well over 2000 pages long *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002) devotes less than quarter of a page to the topic (p 1360f). Interjections are defined as items that “do not combine with other words in integrated

syntactic constructions and have expressive rather than propositional meaning”. The authors distinguish between what Ameka (1992a; 1992b) treats as primary and secondary interjections (*ah, hey, oh, oops, ouch, sh, ugh, wow* vs *blast, bugger, damn, fuck*) where the latter are indeed reanalyzed as interjections rather than as members of their ordinary word classes. The items are argued to function mainly as expressive exclamations; although the discussion of exclamatives is long, it mainly covers clauses and phrases that initiate with *what* and *how* and primary and secondary interjections like *ah! hey!* and *Amazing!* are not mentioned at all. The student version of this grammar, titled *A Student’s Introduction to English Grammar* (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005), presents very much the same story as the original big grammar. The discussion focusses on exclamatives that are *what* and *how*-phrases and clauses, and there is no mention at all of single words functioning as exclamatives. The term *interjection* is not brought up anywhere in this grammar book, including the index.

4. Concluding remarks

The purpose of this paper has been see how interjections, in the sense of a lexical category (or not), have been defined in linguistic literature; if and on what grounds they have been separated from pure response cries; and what their relation is to iconic (mainly in the sense of onomatopoeic) vocabulary items. We have also investigated various English grammar books aimed at university level students of English, to see how their treatment of interjections reflects what is said in linguistic literature. The common denominator in most student-oriented grammars is that interjections are ignored almost completely. Many grammars do not even mention the term, while others mention it in passing, usually in connection with exclamatives. A student interested in the topic will have a hard time piecing together a story that makes sense or reflects what is said about interjections in linguistic literature; they will also have problems seeing the similarities and differences between what Ameka (1992a; 1992b) and others have labelled primary and secondary interjections, and none of the grammar books is going to help them separate interjections (of any type) from pure response cries and from onomatopoeic words. While more advanced students may be able to locate such information from elsewhere—and be advanced enough to read and make sense of it—introductory level students will only be confused by the non-information and unmotivated assumption.

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