

# Negation and the Interpretation of Spanish Rhetorical Exclamatives

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## 1. Introduction

Standard exclamative and interrogative constructions have been shown to share several important structural properties (Cf. Contreras 1999). On the semantic side, it has been claimed (Gutiérrez-Rexach 1996, 2001, Zanuttini & Portner 2003) that the semantics of *wh*-exclamatives can be derived from or is very similar to the semantics of *wh*-questions. Nevertheless, in this paper we show that there are significant differences between rhetorical questions and rhetorical exclamatives, especially with respect to the role of negation and the licensing of Negative Polarity Items (NPIs). In the second section, we characterize rhetorical questions and their ability to license NPIs; in section three, we examine the central properties of exclamatives and, in section four, we focus on rhetorical exclamatives and their behavior with respect to negation and NPI-licensing. A unified account is proposed.

## 2. Rhetorical Questions and NPI licensing

### 2.1. General characterization

Rhetorical questions are normally characterized as questions which do not seek information. They do not constitute requests to update the knowledge state of a conversation participant from the information available in the common ground, thus they seem to have a different purpose. A speaker already knows the “informative” answer when he asks a rhetorical question. Consider the following interrogative sentences:

- (1) ¿Quién levantó un dedo para ayudarnos?  
‘Who lifted a finger to help us?’
- (2) ¿Quién da un duro hoy por ese jugador?  
‘Who would give a red cent for that player?’

When a speaker utters (1) he already knows that nobody did anything to help him, but he is asking such a question with a certain illocutionary goal in mind (irony, etc.). From a semantic perspective, it has been claimed (Gutiérrez-Rexach 1997, 1998; Han 2002) that the set of possible answers to a rhetorical question is a singleton formed by the empty set. For example, the intended answer for (1) would be that the set of persons who have done something to help is empty. Similarly, when uttering (2) we assume that the set of persons who support the relevant football player is empty. Therefore, there would be no need to provide an answer and, pragmatically speaking, it is clear that rhetorical questions are not queries from an illocutionary point of view. They are assertive in nature (Bosque 1980; Escandell 1990, 1999; Gutiérrez-Rexach 1997, 1998; Han 1998, 2002; Asher & Reese 2005). Positive rhetorical questions have the illocutionary force of a negative assertion, and negative rhetorical questions have the illocutionary force of a positive assertion (Sadock 1971), as the following examples show:

- (3) ¿Cuándo levantó un dedo por ti tu madre?  
‘When did your mother lift a finger for you?’

- (4) ¿Qué no ha hecho Juan por María?  
‘What hasn’t Juan done for Mary?’

Under the rhetorical-question reading, these questions seem to respectively assert or presuppose the following propositions: *Your mom never did anything to help you*, and *John has helped Maria a lot*.

## 2.2. NPIs in questions

It is a well-known property of negative polarity items (NPIs) that they normally occur within the scope of negation (Ladusaw 1979). Nevertheless, it has also been observed that they can occur in interrogative sentences without a c-commanding negation. Both weak and strong NPIs (Zwarts 1995) are licensed in sentences of this type:

- (5) ¿Quién ha dicho *nada*?  
‘Who has said anything?’  
(6) ¿Cuántos se han divertido *nunca* leyendo *Ulises*?  
‘How many have ever had fun reading *Ulysses*?’  
(7) ¿Quién *ha pegado ojo* esta noche?  
‘Who has slept anything at all last night?’  
(8) ¿Quién tiene *un pelo de tonto* en este país?  
‘Who is an idiot at all in this country?’

There are several different explanations of this fact in the literature. According to Ladusaw (1979), NPIs are licensed because there is an underlying negation; for Gutiérrez-Rexach (1997) and Han (1998, 2002), rhetorical questions constitute downward-entailing (DE) environments. Rhetorical readings arise because the *wh*-phrase denotes the empty set, the bottom element of a Boolean algebra. In this respect, a speaker is able to ask a rhetorical question when it is possible to calculate the whole entailment order of a question and pick out the bottom element. For instance, if (9) were construed as an information question, it would have the answer set in (10) in a situation where Juan’s closet friends are *Luis* and *Pepe*:

- (9) ¿Quién levantó un dedo para ayudar a Juan?  
‘Who lifted a finger to help Juan?’  
(10) { {Pepe, Luis}, {Luis}, {Pepe},  $\emptyset$  }

However under the rhetorical reading, the *wh*-phrase denotes a singleton set, the one containing the bottom element of (10) (the empty set). There is an apparent problem with the fact that *why*-questions allow NPIs but lack a rhetorical reading. Therefore, we cannot claim that rhetoricity depends only on the presence of the NPI:

- (11) Why did John even say anything?  
(12) Why did John even hit anybody?

Giannakidou (1998, 2006) claims that in questions of this type the truth of the main proposition is presupposed. In the above sentences, the speaker would respectively presuppose that John said something or that John hit somebody. Gutiérrez-Rexach (1997), following Szabolcsi & Zwarts (1993), claims that reasons are structured as semi-lattices without a bottom element. Therefore, they cannot constitute proper denotations of rhetorical questions, since there is not an empty set of reasons. NPIs seem to be sensitive to the availability or not of certain truth-conditional inferences and, more specifically, cannot occur in veridical environments. This would explain the ungrammaticality of (11) and (12):

- (11) \*Juan se sorprende de haber visto animal alguno  
‘\*Juan is surprised of having seen any animal’

- (12) \*Juan se asombra de haber levantado un dedo  
 ‘\*Juan is amazed at having lifted a finger’

### 3. Properties of exclamative sentences

By uttering the exclamatives in (13)-(15), a speaker expresses an emotive attitude (amazement, admiration, surprise...) toward a proposition. In these examples, toward the degree of ugliness of the picture:

- (13) ¡Qué fea es esa foto!  
 ‘How ugly that picture looks!’  
 (14) ¡Lo fea que es esa foto!  
 the ugly that is that picture  
 ‘What an ugly picture!’  
 (15) ¡Si será fea la foto!  
 ‘What an ugly picture!’

Exclamative sentences have two main properties (Zanuttini & Portner 2003). They are factive (i.e. they are within the scope of a factive operator) and they are also associated with a *wh*-operator. The property of factivity entails that the propositional content of the exclamative is presupposed. Consider sentence (16):

- (16) ¡Qué tarde llegó!  
 ‘How late he arrived!’

The above exclamative sentence presupposes the proposition  $p = 'x \text{ was late}'$  and asserts that ‘The speaker is surprised/amazed/etc. that  $p$ ’. Only factive predicates such as ‘it is incredible’, ‘it is amazing’, ‘it is unbelievable’ can embed an exclamative proposition. This explains the ungrammaticality of the following examples:

- (17) \*I wonder what a beautiful house she has!  
 (18) \*I ask how nice your mother is!

The *wh*-operator is responsible for widening the domain of quantification (Zanuttini & Portner, 2003). Widening is associated to a meaning of ‘high degree’, ‘unexpectedness’ and a ‘sense of surprise’. For example, if the normal price of a gallon of milk is \$2, in a situation in which I go to the store and I see that the price has risen and now a gallon costs \$4, my scale of expensiveness becomes dramatically extended far beyond my expectations, allowing me to utter:

- (19) ¡Qué cara está la leche!  
 ‘How expensive milk is!’

As a consequence, the contribution of the exclamative sentence is widened along the expected scale. Namely the relevant entity is placed in the extended interval built over the previous standard scale. The contribution of the exclamative sentence is to widen the associated scale, which generally conveys an implicature of surprise (by the agent of the utterance).

Syntactically, the *wh*-operator acts as the trigger for movement of the *wh*-phrase to the left periphery and is associated with a degree variable (i.e. it can be characterized as a degree operator). Non-degree *wh* words, such as *cuándo* ‘when’ and *por qué* ‘why’, are not allowed; on the other hand, *qué* ‘what’ or ‘how’, *cuánto* ‘how much/many’, or *cómo* ‘how’ are degree operators and can occur in exclamatives. This contrast explains why (19) and (20) are grammatical, but (21) and (22) are not.

- (20) ¡Cuánto compra Juan!  
 ‘The many things that Juan buys!’  
 (21) ¡Cómo come Juan!  
 ‘John eats a lot!’

- (22) \*¡Cuándo compra Juan!  
 ‘When John buys!’  
 (23) \*¡Por qué compra Juan!  
 ‘Why John buys!’

*Wh*-movement is obligatory in an exclamative sentence. In exclamative constructions the *wh*-word cannot remain *in situ* (23) in contrast with what happens with echo-questions, as in (24).

- (24) \*¡Pepito comió qué!  
 ‘Pepito eats what!’  
 (25) ¿Pepito comió qué?  
 ‘Pepito eats what?’

Only gradable adjectives or high-degree adverbs are licensed in this type of sentences. The presence of non-gradable adjectives triggers ungrammaticality, as in (26) and (28):

- (26) ¡Qué maravillosa película!  
 ‘What a wonderful movie!’  
 (27) \*¡Qué lingüista eres!  
 ‘What a linguist you are!’  
 (28) ¡Qué extraordinariamente/increíblemente buena!  
 ‘How incredibly good it is!’  
 (29) \*¡Qué simplemente buena!  
 ‘How ordinarily good it is!’

The raised adjective has to check [+degree] in one of the projections (specifiers) of the CP phrase. According to Gutiérrez-Rexach (2001), the requirement that the degree feature be checked in the C-phrase of the syntactic derivation is probably conditioned by semantic reasons: The degree argument of the adjective is existentially quantified and has wide scope over other operators and quantifiers in the clause.

There is a scalar implicature (Gutiérrez-Rexach 2001, Zanuttini & Portner 2000) associated with the exclamative sentence. This implicature marks a high point in a contextually determined scale. For instance, the degree of the property denoted by the raised adjective (‘Juan’s intelligence’) in the following examples exceeds the speaker’s expectations:

- (30) ¡Vaya inteligente que es Juan!  
 ‘How intelligent John is!’  
 (31) ¡Bien inteligente que es Juan!  
 (32) ¡Lo inteligente que es Juan!  
 (33) ¡Qué inteligente que es Juan!

## 4. Rhetorical exclamatives and negation

### 4.1. Characterizing rhetorical exclamatives

Let us now consider the main characteristics of rhetorical exclamatives. They share many syntactic and semantic properties with standard exclamatives: (i) They express factive propositions; (ii) They only allow gradable adjectives and adverbs; (iii) They have a high degree interpretation; and (iv) There is obligatory attachment of a constituent to a focus position (Bartra & Villalba 2007).

The following examples illustrate these properties:

- (34) ¡Bonita fiesta la que me organizaste!  
 ‘What a nice party you prepared for me!’  
 (35) ¡Simpático comentario el de tu madre!  
 ‘Your mother made such a kind comment!’

- (36) ¡Poco te gusta comer!  
‘How little you like eating!’  
(37) ¡Mal que viven los curas!  
‘Priests live such a miserable life!’

Semantically, rhetorical exclamatives are exclamatory sentences (Zanuttini & Portner 2003) whose meaning is normally the opposite of the one literally expressed, i.e. the speaker expresses an emotive attitude toward a proposition that appears to be the polar reverse of the one expressed.

- (38) ¡Mal que viven los curas! = ‘Priests do not live a bad life, ie they have a good life’  
(39) ¡Poco que te gusta comer! = ‘You do not like eating a little, ie you like eating a lot’  
(40) ¡Tonto eres tú! = ‘You are not an idiot at all’

One could claim that this property is due to a covert or underlying negative operator, i.e. one that is not operational in syntax but is pragmatically active. More interestingly, this negative element seems to have narrow scope: The scopal domain of this negative operator is not the whole proposition, as will be shown below. Its scope affects only the property elicited in the exclamative. An exclamative such as (41) has the interpretation in (42).

- (41) ¡Muy listo eres tú!  
‘lit. You are so smart!’  
(42) Muy [no listo] eres tú =  
‘You are very [not smart], ie. You are dumb’

In a similar fashion, an exclamative such as (43) would have the rhetorical interpretation: ‘Te gusta comer [no poco]’ = ‘You like eating [not a little]’.

- (43) ¡Poco te gusta comer!  
‘How little you like eating!’

Syntactically, the narrow-scope negative element has scope over a Degree Phrase (DegP/AP), and not over the whole CP: (43) does not entail that the addressee does not like eating. Pragmatically, the effect of the underlying negation is to reverse the high-degree implicature usually associated with exclamatory expressions (Portner & Zanuttini 2003). We can paraphrase the exclamatives in (38)- (40) as follows:

- (44) ¡Los curas no viven mal EN ABSOLUTO/PARA NADA!  
(45) ¡Te gusta comer MUCHO!  
(46) ¡Tú no eres tonto EN ABSOLUTO/ PARA NADA!

There is a second scalar implicature in these structures, related to the speaker’s expectations, namely that such expectations are not satisfied, giving rise to several interpretations. More specifically, the following ones can be clearly identified:

*a. The least expected property.* When a speaker utters an exclamative such as (47), she is communicating that the least expected property that anybody may attribute to C.Schiffer is the property of being ugly:

- (47) ¡Muy fea, esta Claudia Schiffer!  
‘That Claudia Schiffer is really ugly!’

*b. Disappointment.* A speaker uttering (48) may express hers disappointment about the fact that Real Madrid played worse than she expected:

- (48) ¡Bien jugó el Real Madrid!  
‘Real Madrid played really well!’

c. *Criticism*. An exclamative such as (49) implicates criticism when the event referred to turns out to be a disaster.

- (49) ¡Bonita fiesta me organizaste!  
‘You arranged such a nice party!’

d. *Irony*. According to Paradis & Willners (2006) and Giora et al. (2005), irony has mitigating effects, attenuating the impact or effect of the speaker’s judgement or assessment on the addressee. Nevertheless, sentences such as (49) can also be used to insult or make fun of somebody:

- (50) ¡Muy inteligente fue usted!  
‘You proved to be a really smart guy!’

#### 4.2. NPI non-licensing

Rhetorical exclamatives differ from rhetorical questions in not allowing NPIs, as can be seen in the following examples.

- (51) \*¡Bonito regalo le has hecho a *nadie*!  
‘\*Nice present you gave to nobody!’  
(52) \*¡Bien que has leído *libro alguno*!  
‘lit. Well you have read any book!’  
(53) \*¡Simpática fue *persona alguna* en la fiesta!  
‘lit. Nice was nobody at the party!’  
(54) \*¡Qué rápido has comido *nada*!  
‘\*How fast you have eaten nothing!’  
(55) \*¡Lista es *lo más mínimo*!  
‘\*Intelligent she is very little!’

Verbless exclamatives, which tend to be interpreted rhetorically, never allow NPIs, as the contrast between (56) and (57) illustrates:

- (56) a. ¡Muy listo, este Pepe!  
‘Very clever, Pepe!’  
b. ¡Muy graciosa, la niña!  
‘Very funny, this girl!’  
(57) a. \*¡Muy listo, estudiante alguno!  
‘Very clever, none of the students!’  
b. \*¡Buen regalo, para nadie!  
‘Good present for nobody!’

There are several apparent exceptions to the incompatibility between rhetorical exclamatives and NPIs. For example, certain rhetorical questions have an exclamatory content and can express an emotive state (surprise, anger, etc.) In this subtype of questions, NPIs are allowed:

- (58) ¡¿Cuándo he dicho yo nada parecido!/?  
‘When did I say something like that?!’  
(59) ¡¿Cómo iba a venir nadie!/?  
‘How come nobody was coming?’

In general, these expressions are mostly construed as rhetorical questions (intonation varies). When the prevailing content is interrogative, NPIs are licensed:

- (60) ¿Cómo que va a levantar un dedo por ti?  
‘How come he is going to lift a finger for you?’

On the other hand, when the exclamatory content prevails, NPIs are not allowed:

- (61) \*¡Cómo que iba a venir nadie!  
 ‘Nobody is really coming!’

From this data, we can conclude that NPIs are not licensed in rhetorical exclamatives. Recall that the negative element we postulated above would not be able to be a legitimate licenser of NPIs, given the fact that it would lack wide scope. The hypothesis that we want to advocate here is that the absence of NPIs in rhetorical exclamatives is related to two aspects: (i) The factive nature of exclamatives and (ii) The fact that negation is active at a pragmatic level.

#### 4.3. Factivity and NPIs

From a semantic perspective, it seems that factive predicates do not allow NPIs, as is shown in the following contrast: Non-factive epistemic verbs like *wonder* license NPIs, whereas an epistemic factive verb such as *know* excludes NPIs:

- (62) John is wondering whether Bill said anything  
 (63) \*John knows that Bill said anything

This is also the case for predicates such as *be surprised* or *be amazed* which, according to Elliot (1971), can embed exclamatives and are also factive (Grimshaw 1976):

- (64) \*Juan se sorprende de haber visto animal alguno  
 ‘\*Juan is surprised about having seen any animal’  
 (65) \*Juan se asombra de haber levantado un dedo  
 ‘\*Juan is amazed of having lifted a finger’

According to Giannakidou (2006), factive environments are not downward-entailing expressions and therefore they block the occurrence of NPIs. For example (66a) does not entail (66b):

- (66) a. I am surprised that you bought a car  
 b. I am surprised that you bought a Honda

Although the explanation we are advocating here is semantic in nature, it would be compatible with Fitzpatrick’s (2005) claim that factive complementizers (CFACT) create an island that blocks the local relation between an NPI and a downward entailing operator, as shown in (67):

- (67) John didn’t find out [<sub>Cfact</sub> that anyone left]

#### 4.4. Narrow scope negation

It has been observed that when negation occurs in an exclamative sentence, it tends to be expletive (Espinal 1997, Portner & Zanuttini 2000, Villalba 2004). In other words, it makes no effective contribution to the interpretation of the whole sentence:

- (68) a. ¡Cuántas mentiras no nos habrá dicho Juan!  
 b. ¡Cuántas mentiras nos habrá dicho Juan!  
 ‘The lies that Juan has told us!’

The two exclamative sentences above have the same meaning: ‘Juan has told us a lot of lies’. According to Espinal (1997), the negative head, which is selected by the head of a non-lexical Intensifier Phrase, is logically absorbed by it at the LF level of syntactic representation. According to her, the relevant derivation is as follows: The verb moves first to the head of the Modal Phrase, then to the head of Tense Phrase, and finally to Agr Phrase for morphological checking. Further movement of

this complex constituent to the head of Neg Phrase and to the head of CP is not allowed because no morphological or syntactic information would be checked on the verb form. However, before LF is reached, this complex constituent must move to the head of NegP, CP and finally to Int for logical reasons. The temporal opacity of the verb, the expletive reading of the negative marker, and the non-specific reading of the *wh*-expression are relative to the intensional frame and the linguistic instructions codified by Int. For example, sentence (69) refers to a past event whereas (70) denotes a non-specific past. This would explain the incompatibility of the exclamative with specific time expressions as in (71):

- (69) A las artes que no le fueron dispensados muchos privilegios  
 ‘Many privileges were not given to the arts’  
 (70) ¡Qué de privilegios no fueron dispensados a las artes!  
 ‘Arts were given a lot of privileges!’  
 (71) \*Que de privilegios no fueron dispensados a las artes ayer!  
 ‘\*Arts were given a lot of privileges yesterday!’

In rhetorical exclamatives, negation is always expletive:

- (72) ¡No es listo el tío!  
 ‘Boy, that guy is smart!’  
 (73) ¡Qué hambre no tendrá Juan!  
 ‘Boy, Juan is hungry!’

Examples (72) and (73) respectively refer to the high degree in the scale of intelligence of the relevant individual and to the high degree of Juan’s hunger. Therefore, negation does not reverse the polarity of the proposition and the interpretation of these exclamatives is equivalent to their non-negated counterparts:

- (74) ¡Es muy listo el tío!  
 (75) ¡Qué hambre tiene Juan!

In the case of rhetorical exclamatives, negation is local to Adj/Adv Phrase (the DegP) and cannot affect the whole proposition, as we have showed before in example (42), that is, it cannot constitute a downward-entailing environment. Thus, rhetorical exclamatives remain a factive environment. An apparent exception occurs when the NPI is focused and in a sentence-initial detached position:

- (76) ¡Un dedo, voy a levantar yo!  
 ‘A finger, I am going to lift’  
 (77) ¡Un duro, voy a dar yo por ese coche!  
 ‘A red cent, I will pay for this car’

The preposed NPIs in (76) and (77) would need to check their focus/negative features and raise to activate the CP layer (focus) and NegP (propositional negation). These NPIs (*levantar un dedo*, *dar un duro*, *importar un pimienta*) would be licensed by this higher covert negative element (Haegeman 1995).

Another apparently exceptional instances are those in which *nada* ‘nothing’ occurs in exclamative constructions. This would support Giannakidou’s (2006) claim that there are some NPIs (*any*-type such as *any*, *anything*, *nothing*) that are more liberal than other NPIs in having access to information beyond the sentence where they occur. This type of items can appear inside the scope of a veridical operator if that operator additionally makes a non-veridical inference available in the global context of the sentence. This is the case of the following example where *nada* appears in a veridical context, and the non-veridical inference is ‘Somebody didn’t bring anything to eat’:

- (78) ¡Han venido con nada para comer!  
 ‘They came with nothing to eat!’

Consequently, covert negation seems to affect the whole proposition in these cases. It behaves as propositional operator and its scope becomes a downward-entailing environment, which is the appropriate one to license NPIs. On the other hand, these two exceptions are different from the degree exclaimatives analyzed in this paper. For example, they cannot be introduced by a *wh*-word; they lack a high degree implicature, etc. We leave the analysis of this type of exclaimatives for future research.

## 5. Conclusion

We have characterized rhetorical exclaimatives as a class of expressions with several idiosyncratic properties. We have postulated a covert negative element with narrow scope over a degree phrase, which triggers the relevant implicature. Since negation is local to the degree domain, it lacks the ability to license NPIs. This is consistent with the factive/veridical nature of these environments. We can also conclude that rhetoricity should be viewed differently in exclaimatives and questions.

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