

On the Discourse Effects of *wh*-Exclamatives

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1. Two implications of *wh*-exclamatives

Wh-exclamatives are, arguably, a formally individuated class of clauses that are conventionally associated with a particular use, on a par with declaratives, interrogatives, or imperatives. The characteristics that set them apart formally have been discussed at length by Elliott (1974), Grimshaw (1979), Gutiérrez-Rexach (1996), among many others. In English, the most prominent property of matrix *wh*-exclamatives is that they can only be formed with *how* and *what*, which are the only *wh*-words that can get amount readings, referring to either an extent of a gradable property or a cardinality.¹ In this paper, we are concerned with their conventional use.²

A sensible first step for investigating the conventionally determined use of *wh*-exclamatives is to determine what is *conveyed* by an exclamative utterance. Utterances of *wh*-exclamatives always convey two distinct implications, which we may call, following Castroviejo Miró (2008), the *descriptive content* and the *expressive content*. The descriptive content specifies that the described amount, which is determined compositionally from the make-up of the *wh*-clause, is high and this is presented as a true fact about the world. The expressive content is about an emotive attitude the speaker has towards the descriptive content. Examples of such attitudes include surprise, amazement, and awe, but their precise nature is not specified. The two implications are illustrated with the *how*-exclamative in (1):

- (1) How many people took part in the rally!
- a. Many people took part in the rally. *descriptive content*
 - b. The speaker is impressed/amazed/surprised/awed . . .
by the number of people who took part in the rally *expressive content*

Wh-exclamatives like (2), which do not include overt number or degree morphology, work the same way, except that, in these cases, a dimension of evaluation has to be fixed contextually (see, e.g., Milner 1978; Gérard 1980; Castroviejo Miró 2006; Rett 2011). The same is true for plain nominal *wh*-exclamatives like (3), which we take to be underlyingly equivalent to (2). In different contexts, the descriptive content of (2) and (3), given in (4a), can convey that the crowd under discussion was very big, very impressive, very interesting, etc. The expressive content of (2) and (3), seen in (4b), is context dependent with respect to both the attitude and the relevant dimension of the descriptive content.

- (2) What a crowd that was!
- (3) What a crowd!

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¹ Embedded *wh*-clauses construed exclamatively do not have this restriction. Also, other languages allow the formation of matrix *wh*-exclamatives with other *wh*-words, such as *who* and *which*, resulting in non-amount readings (Chernilovskaya & Nouwen, 2012). Examples are Russian, Dutch, German, and Greek.

² A wider class of exclamatives in English includes other types, like nominal exclamatives (*The ideas she came up with in one afternoon!*) and inversion exclamatives (*Boy, is this a large crowd!*). We leave it open whether these have the same use, or whether they constitute their own clause types with their own conventional use. With respect to the discourse properties we investigate in this paper, nominal exclamatives appear to pattern with *wh*-exclamatives, while inversion exclamatives behave subtly differently.

- (4) a. That was a very big/impressive/interesting/... crowd. *descriptive content*
 b. The speaker is impressed/amazed/surprised/awed ...
 by the size of the crowd/how impressive the crowd was/... *expressive content*

These two contents of *wh*-exclamatives are felt to be conveyed in a different way from the contents of, say, declaratives. For this reason, the study of *wh*-exclamatives opens a window into non-assertional modes of communication. Such modes of communication play a role in the semantics of a variety of lexical items and constructions. Kaplan (1999) explores the meaning of utterances like *Ouch!* and *Oops!* and explicates the intuition that these work differently from corresponding assertions, such as *I am in pain*, or *I just witnessed a minor mishap*. He suggests that while a competent speaker knows what the latter expressions *mean*, about the former expressions he only knows how they are *used*. Are there also linguistic differences that support the intuitive difference between the two types of expressions? In recent years, there has been considerable interest in the study of such differences, but virtually all this work has focussed on ‘expressive’ items that can be embedded in non-expressive sentence types (*viz.*, declaratives, interrogatives and imperatives), such as ‘expressive modifiers’ like *damn* and epithets like *bastard* (Potts, 2005, 2007) and modal particles in languages such as German (Kratzer (1999); Gutzmann (2008), among others). The primary focus of the study of these items has been the interaction of their meaning with that of the structures in which they are embedded.

Unlike expressive items, matrix *wh*-exclamatives are not embedded into other structures, so their mode of communication can be studied in the absence of interfering factors. Also, unlike *ouch* and *oops*, *wh*-exclamatives have a complex structure and compositionally determined meanings which are, presumably, computed on the basis of the same meanings that the contained expressions have in other environments. Consequently, they constitute a special case of expressive meaning, whose linguistic differences with other kinds of meanings and their modes of communication remain to be explored.

This then raises the question whether it is beyond any doubt that *wh*-exclamatives do not have *some* kind of asserted content, where by ‘asserted’ and ‘assertion’ we mean ‘what is conventionally done with declaratives’, and not the richer notion of Stalnaker (1978), according to which the asserted sentence must be presumed to be news to the hearer, etc. It is not implausible to hypothesize that one of the two contents described above is asserted after all, with the other content being responsible for the intuition that *wh*-exclamatives are non-assertional. One view would be to assume that the descriptive content of exclamatives is basically asserted, while the expressive content is somehow backgrounded or conveyed pragmatically. Another view would be to see the expressive content as being basically asserted, with the descriptive content being conveyed in some other fashion. This latter kind of view is lent some plausibility by the fact that, intuitively, the main point of an exclamative is conveyed by its expressive content, with its descriptive content somehow taken for granted / backgrounded / asserted independently.

In order to shine some light on how the two contents are communicated, we focus on the discourse properties of *wh*-exclamatives, systematically studying the relation that utterances of *wh*-exclamatives bear to adjacent utterances.³ The idea that *wh*-exclamatives assert their descriptive content has been rejected without sufficient consideration, e.g., in Grimshaw (1979) and Rett (2011). To our knowledge, only Castroviejo Miró (2008) explores a wider set of criteria differentiating between the discourse effects of declaratives and *wh*-exclamatives. Our investigation reveals distinct patterns of behavior of the two with respect to surrounding discourse moves. Although the picture turns out to be more complex than generally assumed, we can conclude, on firmer empirical grounds, that indeed neither the descriptive nor the expressive content of *wh*-exclamatives behaves as if it is asserted, and also that the two contents are conveyed quite differently from one another. Moreover, the patterns we observe with respect to surrounding discourse moves ought to be explained by any successful account of the mode of communication of the contents of *wh*-exclamatives.

³ Whether the facts about *wh*-exclamatives we discuss in this paper generalize to other kinds of expressions that ‘express’ or ‘signal’ something remains an open question. Here we aim to outline some of the empirical questions that should be asked in addressing this issue.

2. Reactions to *wh*-exclamatives

In this section, we are concerned with *follow-ups* and *reactions* to *wh*-exclamatives. As a point of comparison, we first look at the discourse properties of utterances of *declarative* sentences. The picture is surprisingly complex but we focus here on a number of rather clear-cut properties that will be relevant in the discussion of *wh*-exclamatives later.

The content of assertions⁴ cannot be directly denied by their speaker, as illustrated in (5). Whether or not the speaker himself can deny a certain putative implication of what he said is a first test for whether this implication is conveyed *necessarily*, and hence for whether the implication can plausibly be traced to a conventional aspect of the utterance. For assertions, it is uncontroversial that they attempt to convey their contents, so it is unsurprising that this content cannot be denied without further ado.

(5) Many people took part in the rally, # but there were not many of them at all.

At the same time, assertions put their content ‘up for discussion’, and hence they can be denied or challenged by their audience. The most straightforward way to challenge an assertion is with a response consisting of, or prefixed with, *No* or *That’s not true*:

(6) *A*: Many people took part in the rally.
B: (No) (that’s not true). Most of the people were curious bystanders.

A particularly striking fact is that assertions can always be challenged, even if their content concerns matters on which the speaker is an authority, and hence can hardly be challenged as being mistaken. That is, the *sincerity* of assertions can always be challenged:

(7) *A*: I am in pain.
B: That’s a lie. / I don’t believe you.

On the other end of the spectrum, among the concurring reactions to assertions, we distinguish between two modes of concurring: *acceptance* and *confirmation*. Gunlogson (2008) has shown the importance of this distinction, which is reflected in the form of concurring responses. *Confirming responses* are responses with which the responder indicates that he has conversation-external evidence for the asserted proposition. They are thus incompatible with a profession of ignorance on the part of the responder:

(8) *A*: That was a big crowd.
B: Yes. / Yeah. / Indeed. / (That’s) right. # I did not know that.

Accepting responses, on the other hand, indicate that the responder has no such conversation-external evidence, and hence takes on a belief in the asserted proposition on the speaker’s testimony alone:

(9) *A*: There was a big crowd.
B: Oh. / Uh-huh. / Okay. (I didn’t know that.)

Compared with this rather clear-cut behavior of assertions with respect to challenging and concurring responses, things are quite complex with *wh*-exclamatives, as we will see in the following section.⁵ Although some of the discourse properties we discuss have been reported before (see, e.g., Grimshaw, 1979; Zanuttini & Portner, 2003; Castroviejo Miró, 2008; Rett, 2008, 2011), here we aim at a more systematic study of the discourse behavior of *wh*-exclamatives. We present our findings as a set of observations made on the basis of introspective judgments and supported by searches on COCA, the Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies, 2008).

⁴ As indicated already, we use the word ‘assertion’ to refer to the discourse effect of a declarative sentence.

⁵ Actually, the situation is far more complicated for assertions as well. For purposes of the comparison we want draw, however, the intricacies of reactions to declaratives and interrogatives discussed by Gunlogson (2008), Farkas & Bruce (2010), Farkas (2011), Farkas & Roelofsen (2012) can be set aside.

2.1. Seven observations

Observation 1 (Denials) Neither the descriptive nor the expressive content of a *wh*-exclamative can be coherently denied by its speaker.⁶

(10) and (11) illustrate this for the descriptive content.

(10) How many people took part in the rally! # But there were only very few of them.

(11) What insightful ideas she came up with! # But they were not insightful (at all).

On the face of it, it may seem that the expressive content can be denied. The *wh*-exclamatives in (12), for instance, can be followed up with (13):

(12) a. How many papers she wrote in her first year!

b. What insightful ideas she came up with!

(13) I am not surprised, though. She is our smartest student.

However, (13) does not take back the emotive attitude expressed by (12a) and (12b) but simply serves to better circumscribe the attitude expressed, by excluding surprise. For (12b), for instance, the speaker may not be surprised but struck by the insight of her ideas.

Observation 2 (Acceptance moves) Acceptance moves are generally infelicitous in response to *wh*-exclamatives. Neither the descriptive nor the expressive content can be explicitly accepted in the way the content of assertions can.

This is illustrated in (14):

(14) A: What a crowd!

B: # Oh. / # Uh-huh. / # Okay. (I did not know that.)

Consistent with this intuition, a search in COCA for “what a|an” followed by *oh*, *OK* or *okay* within a nine-word window yielded no cases of exclamatives responded to by those.⁷

Observation 3 (Confirmation moves) When confirmation moves are used in reaction to a *wh*-exclamative, they generally appear to indicate that the responder shares the speaker’s attitude, rather than just confirm the descriptive or expressive content. Confirmation markers which, after declaratives, can only target truth-conditional content are infelicitous after *wh*-exclamatives.

Some items that often function as confirmation markers when used in response to assertions, like *Right*, *Yeah*, *Yes*, and *Indeed*, can appear in response to *wh*-exclamatives.⁸ The following examples from COCA illustrate this:

(15) In this case, it was a perfect belly landing, I’m sure a very hard one, and I’m sure that when those engine cowlings started to suck in the water of the Hudson River, that plane jerked to a very fast stop and the cockpit would have slammed down into the water. *But, boy, what an amazing job.* KELLY: *Indeed.*

⁶ Zanuttini & Portner (2003) make a similar observation for the descriptive content. They initially take the descriptive content of *wh*-exclamatives to be a conventional scalar implicature, which therefore cannot be denied in subsequent discourse. They ultimately aim to derive it from the obligatory widening applied to the domain of the *wh*-expression.

⁷ The corresponding search for *uh-huh* did yield one occurrence, which is shown in (i):

(i) “What a mess.” “Uh-huh.”

However, it should be noted that *uh-huh*, in this case needs a rather particular intonation, which is different from the standard intonation for accepting backchannels, as in (9). The latter is, in general, ruled out after *wh*-exclamatives. We assume that *uh-huh* with the special intonation is in fact a confirming and not just an accepting move.

⁸ Related is Castroviejo Miró’s (2008) observation that *wh*-exclamatives can be accompanied by a ‘confirmation tag’, such as *isn’t it?* We see the tags as requests for confirmation that the addressee shares in the speaker’s attitude.

- (16) ... you can just leave mint sprigs in your pitcher of water in the refrigerator and have that kind of spa water, you know? STORM: Ooh. Ms-RITCHIE: It's good. STORM: This is really, really good. Ms-RITCHIE: OK. STORM: *What a great idea.* Ms-RITCHIE: *Right.*
- (17) GIFFORD: My brother and his wife and his daughter and granddaughter came. [...] KOTB: *What a sweet weekend.* GIFFORD: *Yes.*

Care has to be taken, however, to determine what these markers confirm or agree with. While they are usually used to confirm the content of an assertion, *yeah* and *yes*, in particular, can be used as more general markers of agreement, confirming the 'point' the original speaker intended to make with his utterance. (18) illustrates this for declaratives, and (19) is a structurally similar example from COCA.

- (18) A: I learned a lot in this course.
B: Yeah, me too. / Yes, me too.
- (19) "I think doing this movie helped me in real life. I have an almost 13-year-old. The girl in the movie was 14, and it was very interesting to be around her. There are big differences between 12, 13 and 14, and I got to spend a lot of time with a 14-year-old, so that was useful for me. *I think I learned a few things.*" "Oh yeah, absolutely. It couldn't be more relevant than it is. It's exactly what's going on."

In (18), *B's yeah / yes* need not indicate that *B* has independent evidence for the proposition that *A* learned a lot. Rather, it indicates that *B* agrees with *A's* point that the course was useful. We hypothesize that confirmation markers, when they respond to *wh*-exclamatives, generally function as markers of such more general agreement: They do not signal agreement with the descriptive or expressive content, but rather that the responder shares the speaker's attitude towards the descriptive content. It is difficult to establish this thesis conclusively, since in many contexts, it is hard to distinguish an indication of a shared attitude from a confirmation of the descriptive or expressive content exclusively. The reason for this is that in order to share the speaker's attitude towards the descriptive content, the addressee should share the descriptive content itself. Consider, for example, (15): It seems that Kelly shares the attitude expressed by her interlocutor, and hence also that she agrees with the descriptive content. In turn, both these things can, in many contexts, be taken as conversation-external evidence that the expressive content of the exclamation is true.

We can marshal some supporting evidence for our hypothesis. Some confirmation markers, when used in response to assertions, can *only* function to confirm semantic content. A particularly clear-cut example is *That's right*. Consider the variant of (18) in (20). In this case, *B's* response only makes sense if *B* had the opportunity to see *A* demonstrate the skills *A* picked up in the course, i.e., if he has conversation-external evidence for the truth of *A's* assertion.

- (20) A: I learned a lot in this course.
B: That's right.

In contrast, we find that *That's right* is generally infelicitous after *wh*-exclamatives:⁹

- (21) A: What a big crowd that is!
B: # That's right.

It is likely that what constrains the things that can be confirmed with *That's right* is, at least in part, restrictions on what *that* can refer to. In general, *that* can refer to events, so it is free to refer to the previous utterance as a whole, as in (22), which works in reply to declaratives and *wh*-exclamatives alike.

- (22) That's a strange thing to say.

However, in *That's right*, *that* must refer to something else, which *right* can be applied to. Apparently, the semantic content of declaratives has the right status to be referred to by this use of *that*, while neither

⁹ Also, a COCA search for "what a|an" followed by "right" within a 9-word window yielded no exclamatives reacted to by "That's right".

content of *wh*-exclamatives has the same status. As Chris Potts (p.c.) points out, this is a property of ‘content-referring’ *that* in general:

- (23) A: What a big crowd that is!
B: # That’s interesting/fun/exciting . . .

Observation 4: *Yeah* responses In response to *wh*-exclamatives, *yeah* may indicate that the responder shares the general assessment of the original speaker, without fully agreeing with either content of the *wh*-exclamative. *Yeah* behaves in a parallel way with assertions.

Some items, such as *yeah*, which often function as markers for confirming the content of an assertion, are special in that they can be used, along with a follow-up, even if the responder does not fully agree with the original speaker’s assessment.

- (24) A: That movie was awesome.
B: Yeah, it was good.

We also find such uses with *wh*-exclamatives, where the responder clearly does not share the attitude of the original speaker, and indicates that he does not even whole-heartedly believe the descriptive content. While reacting with *yeah*, the responder tries at the same time to down-tone the effect of the speaker’s exclamative by generalizing its descriptive content. Consider examples (25) and (26) from COCA. In (26), Letter S’s reaction explicitly weakens the descriptive content of Stensland’s exclamative.

- (25) CRIER: The world needs you back. But in the meantime, the HBO special and the new CD, “Totally Committed.” *What a pleasure.* FOXWORTHY: *Yeah. That’s good.*
(26) STENSLAND: *Well, what a great job.* Letter S: *Yeah, it’s not bad, yeah.*

The down-toning can be construed as a pro-forma agreement, implicitly conveying disagreement, or as conventionalized understatement. Interestingly, while responses containing *yeah* can indirectly express a certain degree of disagreement, they cannot outright contradict the statement they react to:¹⁰

- (27) A: This movie was awesome. / What a great movie that was!
B: Yeah, # it was so-so.

It is not always obvious whether a *yeah* response down-tones the descriptive content or affirms it. Ms. Foose’s utterance in (28) can be interpreted as indicating that she shares the emotive response of Wragge, providing an additional reason why she finds the concept great (namely, because it’s also fun). It can also be taken to challenge the descriptive content of Wragge’s exclamative; by designating the concept to be fun, she implicates that it is just fun, not great.

- (28) Ms-FOOSE: And hang out in the refrigerator for about an hour. Then we slide this right in our paper sack just like this. WRAGGE: *What a great concept.* Ms-FOOSE: *Yeah. It’s fun.*

Our discussion of the variety of concurring responses leads to two conclusions. The first conclusion is that confirmation moves that clearly target a certain type of semantic content, like *That’s right* (for asserted content), provide the most reliable evidence. The behavior of responses like *Yeah*, *Yes*, *Indeed* or *Right* can only serve as supporting evidence, at least in the absence of a theory of what kinds of contents these can target. The second conclusion is more general: The descriptive content of a *wh*-exclamative cannot be confirmed in the same way as asserted content can.

Observation 5 (Audience challenges) While the expressive content of *wh*-exclamatives can be challenged by the audience, the expressive content cannot (Castroviejo Miró, 2008).

In (29), *B* challenges *A*’s contention that there were many participants at the rally:

¹⁰ We are grateful to Donka Farkas for pointing this out to us.

- (29) A: How many people took part in the rally!
B: Well, most of the people were just bystanders.

The following examples from COCA illustrate the same point.¹¹

- (30) “*What a mess,*” he says. “*Not so bad,*” she says, already loyal to what will be their home.
(31) “Which of your patients has the greatest, richest, most incredible bank deposits?” The nurse glanced up at this strange request. “Pardon?” “You heard me very clearly,” said the tall gaunt man. “*What a strange question.*” “*Not strange when you think what’s at risk.*”
(32) Becky covered her face with her hands. “I told him how glad I was he came home whole! Oh, Mother Warne! *What a stupid thing to say!*” “*Not at all!*” Molly patted her gently.

In contrast, the audience can never directly challenge the expressive content of *wh*-exclamatives:

- (33) A: How many people took part in the rally!
B: # Well / # No, you are not surprised/impressed/...
B: # Are you sure you’re surprised/impressed/...?

Of the examples retrieved by the search described above none was an instance of a challenge to the expressive content.

Observation 6 (No-responses) *Wh*-exclamatives cannot generally be challenged by using *no*. Also, *wh*-exclamatives appear to be ‘transparent’ to *no*-responses, in the sense that if *no* follows an exclamative, it actually reacts to the preceding utterance.

A COCA search for “what a|an” followed by *no* in a 9-word window did not result in any instance of a *wh*-exclamative challenged by the use of *no*. But it did reveal an interesting set of examples, where *no* occurs after *wh*-exclamatives. However, in all such cases, *no* turned out to respond to the utterance preceding the exclamative utterance. One such example is in (34):

- (34) “Amy told me,” Karl says. “I never told Amy I liked Elizabeth,” Jeremy says. “So now Amy is a mind-reader as well as a blabbermouth? *What a terrible, deadly combination!*” “*No,*” Karl says, grudgingly. “Elizabeth told Amy that she likes you. So I just figured you liked her back.”

For the purposes of the *no*-response, the exclamative might as well not have been there. This is quite a striking fact, as it is generally quite hard to use a simple *no* to respond to a declarative that is a couple of moves back:

- (35) A: Last year, we spent our surplus wisely. This year we have a deficit.
B: ??No, we squandered last year’s surplus!
B: Wait, back up a second: We squandered last year’s surplus!

Rett (2011) uses the contrast in the acceptability of the *No*-response between declarative exclamations as in (36) and *wh*-exclamatives as in (37) to argue that declarative exclamations count as assertions while *wh*-exclamatives do not:

- (36) A: (Wow,) John bakes delicious desserts!
B: No (he doesn’t), these are store-bought. John’s actually a terrible cook.
(37) A: (My,) What delicious desserts John bakes!
B: ?No (he doesn’t), these are store-bought. John’s actually a terrible cook.

Our discussion has shown that the problem with (37) is specifically the use of *no* rather than the challenge to the descriptive content. If the response in (37) is instead prefixed by *well*, or nothing at all, it is unproblematic, on a par with (29) – (32).

¹¹ They resulted from a search for “what a|an” followed by “not” in a 9-word window.

Observation 7 (Lying) Neither content of *wh*-exclamatives can be challenged as a lie.

This observation is illustrated in (38a) for the descriptive and in (38b) for the expressive content:

- (38) A: What a big crowd that is!
 a. B: # That's a lie. (It wasn't big.) / # I don't believe you. (It wasn't big.)
 b. B: # That's a lie. (You are not surprised / impressed / ...) /
 # I don't believe you (You are not surprised / impressed / ...).

This is, again, in contrast with assertions, which *always* can be challenged as lies or reacted to with *I don't believe you*, even when the speaker is an epistemic authority that the responder should defer to.

2.2. Other non-concurring responses

While neither content of exclamatives can be challenged directly by the audience, they can give rise to debate, which, at first glance, may seem as stemming from a challenge to the expressive content. In (39), for instance, *B* is not denying that *A* is struck by the amount of mail accumulated during their absence, but is rather questioning the grounds for *A*'s surprise. In short, *B* is not claiming that *A* was not struck but rather that *A* should not have been struck given facts possibly not considered by *A*.

- (39) [Returning after a long trip abroad, finding a huge pile of mail.]¹²
 A: What a huge pile of mail!
 B: That's not surprising. / What did you expect? / Why are you surprised?
 We were gone for 6 months!

What is interesting about cases like (39) is that *A* and *B* agree about the size of the pile, and can even agree about the standard of comparison, i.e., both would assent to the description of the pile of mail as huge. So, unlike the cases we considered in connection with Observation 5, *B* is not challenging the descriptive content of *A*'s exclamation.

Other kinds of responses provide an explanation for the fact exclaimed over. (40), from "Little Red Riding Hood", illustrates this kind of response.

- (40) LRRH: What big ears you have!
 Wolf: All the better to hear you with, my child.

The wolf's response does not challenge either content of the exclamation (i.e., that he has very big ears, or that LRRH is surprised about this), but gives justification for things being the way they are, in the hopes that LRRH ceases to be surprised (clearly, the wolf would rather that LRRH not be so surprised, as that might make her suspicious).

A more challenging case is the one in (41):

- (41) [A and B are both looking at B's feet]¹³
 A: What big feet you have!
 B: What do you mean? My feet are big, but not that big.

Here, *A* and *B* do not disagree about the size of *B*'s feet. They could be construed as disagreeing about where on the scale of foot size the standard for *big* should be placed, and hence about the deviation from the standard, in which case they may be disagreeing about the descriptive content. In the absence of a clear understanding of how standards are negotiated between discourse participants, it is also plausible to construe them as agreeing about the facts and about the standard, but as disagreeing about whether the deviation from the standard is significant enough to be exclamation-worthy.

¹² We thank Itamar Francez for raising the question about examples of this form.

¹³ We thank Johan Brandtler for this example.

2.3. Summary

We have seen that the descriptive content of a *wh*-exclamative ...

- a. ... *cannot* be coherently denied by the speaker of the exclamative.
- b. ... *cannot* be explicitly accepted in the way the asserted content can.
- c. ... rarely, if ever, is the (only) thing targeted by confirmation markers.
- d. ... *cannot* be confirmed by responses that are constrained to confirm asserted content.
- e. ... *can* be challenged by the audience.
- f. ... *cannot* be challenged by using *No*, *That's a lie*, or *I don't believe you*.

In many ways, the descriptive content of *wh*-exclamatives behaves much like the content of semantic presuppositions in declaratives—but there are differences, too. One such difference pertains to the answering of questions, and will be discussed in Section 3.

We have also seen that the *expressive content* of *wh*-exclamatives behaves differently in some respects. Specifically, it ...

- a. ... *cannot* be coherently denied by the speaker of the exclamative.
- b. ... *cannot* be explicitly accepted in the way the asserted content can.
- c. ... *cannot* be explicitly confirmed in the way the asserted content can.
- d. ... *cannot* be challenged by the audience, not even as a lie.
- e. ... *can* be commented on by questioning beliefs that are necessary for the attitude expressed.

3. Exclamatives as reactions and responses to questions

With respect to exclamatives as reactions to other utterances, we focus on the special case of exclamatives as reactions and responses to questions. Exclamatives can be used to comment on the fact that the question was asked. (42) is from Castroviejo Miró (2008).

- (42) [A is not used to dating girls and his aunt has set him up with her neighbor. Everybody thinks A should not go on a blind date, so when A asks his question, B understands that he is planning to meet the girl.]
 A: How pretty is she?
 B: How stupid you are!

Many corpus examples are of this kind. In (43), from COCA, the exclamative is used to comment on the content of the question:

- (43) “I said, where were you?” “What a silly question,” she answered, catching her breath. “You know it’s my bingo night.”

The situation is more complicated with exclamatives as *responses* to questions. Grimshaw (1979) pointed out cases, like (44), where exclamatives are infelicitous as responses, which she took to be the case in general.

- (44) A: How tall is John?
 a. B: # How tall John is!
 b. B: John is very tall.

Grimshaw and, following her, Zanuttini & Portner (2003) aimed to account for this fact by assuming that the descriptive content, which would constitute an answer to the question in (44), is a semantic presupposition of the exclamative. This explanation, however, cannot be on the right track. In general, questions can be answered by uttering a sentence that semantically presupposes the answer:

- (45) A: Is France a monarchy?
 B: The queen (of France) is standing in front of you.

The exclamative in (44a) conveys, in virtue of its descriptive content, exactly what the declarative answer in (44b) asserts—and yet, it is infelicitous as a response to the question. Upon reflection, this is quite surprising, given that just about any declarative can function as a felicitous response to just about any interrogative, if the context is right. All that is necessary is that the declarative contextually entail an answer satisfying the questioner's information needs. Alternatively, the declarative may provide information that renders the question irrelevant, as in (46b). Even a declarative response that explicitly withholds information may be felicitous, as an indication that the responder is unwilling or unable to provide an answer, as in (46c).

- (46) a. A: Will Jones vote for the new tax?
 B: He has signed a pledge against it.
 b. A: Does anyone have an umbrella?
 B: It is not going to rain.
 c. A: Will it be raining tomorrow?
 B: It will or it won't.
 B: It may or it may not.

The puzzle goes deeper, in a way that previous discussions of examples like (44) have not appreciated. To begin with, as seen in (47), *wh*-exclamatives *can* provide answers to questions indirectly, as Castroviejo Miró (2008) mentions. They can also sometimes be used to provide a fully-resolving answer in a fairly direct manner. (48) is such an example from COCA.

- (47) A: Did you enjoy your vacation?
 B: What great fun we had!
- (48) STAHL: *Well, what's your reaction?* Mr-FRANKLIN: *What a magnificent liar.*

Although *B*'s exclamative in (47) does not answer *A*'s question directly, it indirectly conveys the answer (yes, in this case), by expressing an attitude prompted by consideration of the question. In theory, it seems that it should be possible to construe (44a) in the same way, but this is not possible. (44a) remains infelicitous.

Why is it that exclamatives can function as indirect and direct responses in some cases, and yet they are completely barred in others? The correct generalization seems to be that they are infelicitous just in case their descriptive content provides a resolving answer to the question that was asked. Why should that be the case?

4. Conclusion

We have seen that neither the descriptive nor the expressive content of *wh*-exclamatives behaves as if it is asserted. The question then is: how do they enter the common ground when a *wh*-exclamative is uttered? The right answer to this question will also be able to derive the observations in section 2 and account for the puzzling behavior of exclamatives as responses to questions, outlined in section 3. It appears that the process of proposing an update to the common ground which needs to be accepted or rejected is side-stepped with *wh*-exclamatives. It will not do to just say that, in virtue of linguistic convention, an exclamative 'directly' enters its contents into the common ground (as is proposed by Castroviejo Miró (2008)), without the addressee having the opportunity to interfere: The common ground is a jointly constructed object, and what is in it depends in part on what the addressee believes (or is willing to pretend to believe). Given that no utterance of any kind can directly make the addressee believe something, utterances ought not to be able to directly add their contents to the common ground.

Of course, there is information that directly enters the common ground, namely information about observable events happening in the vicinity of the conversation. In an oft-cited example, Stalnaker (1978) points out that if, during a conversation, a goat suddenly walks in, this can be assumed to be common ground, given that all interlocutors observe the goat (and observe each other observing the goat). Another example of such publicly observable events happening during a conversation are, of course, utterances. *So the fact that an exclamative was uttered* will always directly enter the common ground. But this alone will not tell us how the two contents enter the common ground.

It might be thought that the ways in which *wh*-exclamatives differ from declaratives can be explained by giving *wh*-exclamatives non-propositional denotations, or even that these differences show that they cannot have propositions as denotations. Such an argument does not go through, unless it is accompanied by a theory of the form-force mapping that assigns all proposition-denoting sentences the same context-change effect, and ensures that nothing else has this context-change effect—but it is unclear why the theory should stipulate that. So the differences in the discourse behavior which we have discussed here do not necessitate a non-propositional denotation. Nor should the fact that we discussed these properties in terms of two *contents* that we have characterized by propositions be taken as an indication that they *have to* denote propositions. Even if the output of semantic composition is an object that is not a proposition, it may be turned into one in the specification of the context-change effect. See Rett (2011) for an example. Rett assumes that exclamatives semantically denote properties of degrees, but that these are turned into propositions on the illocutionary level, by a process involving existential closure of the degree argument. The more general point is that the type of denotatum does not determine the type of context-change effect. The context-change effect of a clause type is a matter of linguistic convention, and may *constrain* the type of denotatum that a clause type can have, but it will usually not determine it. The kinds of discourse effects we have been investigating here all need to be explained in terms of the context-change effect rather than in terms of the denotatum of *wh*-exclamatives.

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