

A Degree Account of Exclamatives

Jessica Rett

An exclamation whose form is a *wh*-clause (1a) differs in two key ways from an exclamation whose form is a declarative (1b).

- (1) a. How very early your class is! b. (Wow,) Your class is at 8!

The content of the former must involve degrees in a certain sense ('the Degree Restriction'; see also Milner, 1978; Gèrard, 1980; Michaelis and Lambrecht, 1996) and these degrees must be high relative to a contextual standard ('the Evaluativity Restriction'). Accounting for these differences requires positing two different illocutionary forces of exclamation: one whose domain is a proposition (for 1b), and one whose domain is a degree property (for 1a).

In uttering an exclamation, the goal of the speaker is to express that he is surprised by the content of the utterance (although this expression can be insincere; Searle, 1969). While speech acts like assertions are *descriptively correct*, exclamations are *expressively correct* (Kaplan, 1999), and this is how I will characterize the meaning of an exclamation in a given context.

1. The Degree Restriction. Imagine a scenario in which Benny is an American, and so we expect him to speak only English. You come to find out that he additionally speaks Japanese. In such a scenario, your utterance of the declarative exclamation (2a) would be expressively correct, but your utterance of the *wh*-exclamative in (2b) would not.

- (2) a. Benny speaks English and Japanese! b. (My,) What languages Benny speaks!

There are two types of scenarios in which (2b) is expressively correct: one in which we expect Benny to speak only one language and he in fact speaks 9 languages (an amount reading); and one in which we expect Benny to speak only commonplace languages and he instead speaks exotic ones (a gradable reading). What these two scenarios have in common is that they are instances of a speaker expressing surprise that a set of degrees holds of a particular degree property. As the first scenario demonstrated, (2b) cannot be used to express surprise that a set of individuals (the English and Japanese languages) holds of a particular individual property.

This characteristic is not unique to (2b) but extends to all *wh*-exclamatives. Imagine a scenario in which you are at a rodeo, and you expect Buck to ride his horse bare-backed (as all the other cowboys do). He instead rides his horse saddled (assume that no one manner is more dangerous/challenging/etc. than the other, just that one is unexpected relative to the other).

- (3) a. Buck rode his horse saddled! b. (My,) How Buck rode his horse!

In this scenario, (3a) is expressively correct but (3b) is not. (3b) cannot be used to express surprise that Buck is riding his horse in a particular manner. (3b) is expressively correct if the speaker is surprised that Buck rode his horse with a high degree of e.g. gracefulness.

2. The Evaluativity Restriction. An expressively correct utterance of a *wh*-exclamative – but not a declarative exclamation – must additionally involve degrees which are high relative to a contextual standard ('evaluative' degrees, Rett, 2007). Take a scenario in which you expect Meryl to be extremely tall because you know Meryl's parents are extremely tall. But Meryl is actually of average height in every respect. The fact that you are surprised by Meryl's height is not sufficient to make your utterance of *Meryl, how short you are!* expressively correct. This exclamation is odd in this scenario because Meryl is not in fact short, and its correctness requires that she be. I will tie this restriction to the difference between (4a) and (4b) and the obligatory presence of degree operators *tan* and *més* in Catalan *quin*-exclamatives (Castroviejo Miró, 2006).

- (4) a. How *(very) many shoes you own! b. How (very) few shoes you own!

The Analysis. The Degree and Evaluativity Restriction have important ramifications for an account of the form and content of exclamations. Because the form of a declarative exclamation

seems to be a declarative, it is natural to think that its semantic content is a proposition, and therefore that the illocutionary force used to utter a declarative exclamation applies to a proposition.

(5) PROPOSITION E-FORCE(p) is expressively correct iff the speaker in C is surprised that p .

However, this illocutionary force couldn't possibly be responsible for the utterance of a *wh*-exclamative. The Degree Restriction shows that the illocutionary force used to express a *wh*-exclamative can discriminate between degree-related content and non-degree-related content. If its domain was a proposition, it could not so discriminate. The same argument holds against an account in which the content of a *wh*-exclamative is a set of propositions, as we might expect if *wh*-exclamatives are expressed with questions (Zanuttini and Portner, 2003). If the domain of *wh*-exclamative illocutionary force was a set of propositions, the semantics would not be able to discern between sets of propositions that constitute answers to a degree question and sets of propositions that constitute answers to e.g. an individual question. We would wrongly predict that e.g. (2b) could be used to express surprise that Benny knows English and Japanese.

I propose that the illocutionary force used to utter *wh*-exclamatives is a function from degree properties to expressions of surprise, where \mathcal{D} is a degree property and s_i a contextual standard.

(6) DEGREE E-FORCE (\mathcal{D}) is expressively correct iff
 $\exists d[d > s_i \text{ and the speaker in } C \text{ is surprised that } \lambda w.\mathcal{D}(d)(w)].$

This means that the form of a *wh*-exclamative – a *wh*-clause – denotes a degree property. (This explains why the content of an exclamative doesn't seem to be presupposed or asserted.) It's possible that *wh*-exclamatives are expressed with questions: in a Groenendijk and Stokhof (1989) account in which n -constituent questions denote n -place relations (and the form in e.g. (4b) thereby denotes a degree property). It's also possible they're expressed with free relatives: in some accounts, free relatives denote properties (Jacobson, 1995; Caponigro, 2004).

The consequences of this analysis are especially interesting given that nominal exclamatives and inversion exclamatives, too, are subject to the Degree and Evaluativity Restrictions.

(7) a. (Oh,) The languages Benny speaks! b. (Boy,) Did Buck ride his horse!

(7a) is only expressively correct if the speaker is surprised at the number of languages Benny speaks or that they exhibit some property to a high degree. Unlike the declarative exclamation *Buck rode his horse!*, (7b) can only be used to exclaim surprise that Buck rode his horse in some manner to a high degree, not that he rode it at all or that he rode it in one manner rather than another.

This suggests the content of nominal and inversion exclamatives, too, is a degree property. For nominal exclamatives, just like *wh*-exclamatives, this could be explained by assuming that their form is a (concealed) question or a (headed) relative clause (one of the readings available for (7a) is reminiscent of Carlson's/Heim's amount relatives). However, extant semantic accounts of forms like (7b) – either a yes/no question or a declarative with inversion – are ones in which they denote either a set of propositions or a proposition. I discuss additional motivation for and repercussions of an analysis in which the content of an inversion exclamative is a degree property.

Caponigro, I. (2004). The semantic contribution of *wh*-words and type-shifts: evidence from free relatives crosslinguistically. In Young, R., editor, *Proceedings of SALT XIV*, pages 38–55. CLC Publications, Cornell University.

Castroviejo Miró, E. (2006). *Wh-Exclamatives in Catalan*. PhD thesis, Universitat de Barcelona, Barcelona.

Gérard, J. (1980). *L'exclamation en français*. Niemeyer, Tübingen.

Groenendijk, J. and Stokhof, M. (1989). Type-shifting rules and the semantics of interrogatives. In Chierchia, G., Partee, B., and Turner, R., editors, *Properties, Types and Meanings, vol. 2: Semantic Issues*, pages 21–68. Kluwer.

Jacobson, P. (1995). On the quantificational force of English free relatives. In Bach, E., Jelinek, E., Kratzer, A., and Partee, B., editors, *Quantification in Natural Languages*, pages 451–486. Kluwer.

Kaplan, D. (1999). The meaning of 'Ouch' and 'Oops'. Presented at the *Cornell Conference on Context Dependency*.

Michaelis, L. and Lambrecht, K. (1996). The exclamative sentence type in English. In Goldberg, A., editor, *Conceptual Structure, discourse and language*, pages 375–389. CSLI.

Milner, J.-C. (1978). *De la Syntaxe à l'interprétation: Quantités, Insultes, Exclamations*. Éditions du Seuil, Paris.

Rett, J. (2007). Antonymy and evaluativity. In Gibson, M. and Friedman, T., editors, *Proceedings of SALT XVII*. CLC.

Searle, J. (1969). *Speech Acts*. Cambridge University Press.

Zanuttini, R. and Portner, P. (2003). Exclamative clauses: at the syntax-semantics interface. *Language*, 79(1):39–81.