On the syntactic encoding of interjections: evidence from Emilian dialects

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Building on previous studies on the syntactization of logophoric and conversational features (cf. Speas & Tenny (2003), Sigurdsson (2004), Bianchi (2006), Baker (2008), Giorgi (2010), Haegeman & Hill (2013), Haegeman (2014), Krifka (2014)), in this work I will sketch a formal account of the syntactic and interpretive properties of interjections based on evidence from Emilian dialects and standard Italian. In particular, adopting a cartographic approach to the functional layout of the left periphery, I will argue for the necessity of a syntactic encoding of information pertaining to the interface between utterance and discourse within the highest layer of clause structure.

Interjections can be split into three categories, depending on whether they must, they can or they cannot be prosodically and syntactically integrated with the associated clause.

The first class of interjections, the ones that must be integrated with the associated clause, is exemplified in (1) with *mo* (*vaca*) in the Emilian dialect of Modena:

(1) *Mo* (*vaca*)   *(s') l'è gnù   elt!
    Interjection *(if) has become tall

As discussed in detail by Alessandrini (2012), in (1) the complex clause initial interjection is obligatorily followed by the complementizer *se* and is clearly prosodically integrated with the rest of the clause; moreover, no topicalized or focalized constituent can intervene between the interjection and the complementizer, which suggests that the two elements presumably entertain a spec-head agreement relation. The hypothesis that the interjection in (1) is a maximal projection from the categorial point of view (and hence occupy a specifier position) is reinforced by their compositional nature; the structural representation proposed by Alessandrini (2012) for (1) is the following, where interjection and complementizer occupy respectively the specifier and the head of the left-peripheral projection ForceP:

(2) [ForceP Mo (vaca) [Force° s'] [FinP l'è gnù elt!]]

This structural analysis is perfectly compatible with the exclamative reading of (1), by which the speaker states that John's degree of tallness is situated beyond an expected threshold: the exclamative reading is generally taken to be linked to the activation of ForceP, the functional projection encoding clause typing features (cf. Rizzi (1997), Benincà (2001)).

The second category of interjections, the ones that can (but need not) be integrated with the associated clause, is exemplified by *sorbla* in the Emilian dialect of Bologna; it can either be followed by *se*, like in (3a), or be prosodically and syntactically independent, in which case it usually precedes the associated clause, as exemplified in (3b):

(3) a. *Sorbla*   se l'è gnù   elt!
       Interjection if has become tall!

b. *Sorbla*!   L'è gnù   elt!
Interjection - Has become tall

The structural representation proposed for the examples in (3a-b) is reported in (4a-b):

(4) a. [ForceP Sorbla [Force° se] [FinP l'è gnù elt!]]
    b. [SpeechActP [SA° Sorbla!] [ForceP [FinP L'è gnù elt!]]]

In particular, concerning the relation between (4a) and (4b) I will assume that the interjection is reanalyzed, as a consequence of a well attested diachronic process of specifier to head reanalysis (cf. van Gelderen (2004a)/(2004b), Willis (2007)), as the head of a contiguous SpeechAct projection immediately dominating ForceP (cf. Haegeman & Hill (2013), Haegeman (2014)): this accounts for the prosodic non integration of the interjection - which is separated from the associated clause by a clear intonational break - as well as for the interpretive properties of (3b) to the effect that the interjection represents here an independent illocutionary act which includes the expression of the speaker's mental state (conventionally codified by the interjection).

Let us turn finally to the third type of interjections, namely the ones that cannot be integrated with the associated clause, exemplified here with the Italian interjection *però* expressing admirative surprise, which can either precede or follow the associated clause:

(5) a. *Però*! Gianni è diventato alto!   b. Gianni è diventato alto! *Però*!
    Interjection! John has become tall!   John has become tall! Interjection

    c. **Però* se Gianni è diventato alto!
       Interjection if John has become tall!

I surmise that this kind of interjections are always first merged as heads of the SpeechAct projection, giving rise to the basic word order in (5a); as for (5b), the clause final position of the interjection can be derived from the optional raising of the nuclear clause FinP to the specifier of SpeechActP, as represented in (6):

(6) [SpeechActP [FinP Gianni è diventato alto!]$_x$ [SA° Però!] [ForceP t$_x$]]

Interestingly, only the interjections belonging to the second and third class can be uttered in isolation in out of the blue contexts; this property can be derived by the hypothesis that only interjections occupying the head SpeechAct° can reach the head of the adjacent Speaker projection where, according to Giorgi (2010), the speaker's spatio-temporal coordinates are codified:

(7) [SpeakerP [Sp° Sorbla!/Però!$_x$] [SpeechActP [SA° t$_x$] [ForceP [FinP Ø]]]]

These interjections express an emotional reaction to a linguistic or extra-linguistic event which is manifest in the speech situation: only after the interjection has raised to the next higher head Speaker° can the spatio-temporal anchoring of the utterance come about, that is, only in that case can take place the deictic reference to the event of the external world that is the source of the speaker's mental state, which allows for the deletion of the associated clause.