Exclamatives in Early English Dialogues

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Abstract

Exclamative is a term that covers a range of syntactic constructions which all semantically/pragmatically express exclamations. English examples include, but are not limited to, the following instances:
(1) *How*-exclamatives: "How beautiful she is!" "How beautiful!" "How he can say such a thing!"

(2) *That*-exclamatives: "That I should live to see this!"

(3) *What + a*-exclamatives: "What a nerd he is!"

(4) The things she says!

(5) What books she reads!

(6) What, me worry?

(7) Boy, is syntax easy! (McCawley 1973)

(8) Wow, what delicious cake John bakes! (Rett 2011)

English exclamatives therefore can occur in a variety of forms, ranging from fully-fledged sentences to one word utterances.

The question that arises is what determines which syntactic form is used by speakers in which contexts. The focus of this paper thus is on three particular non-canonical exclamatives, namely those that occur in insubordinated form (Evans 2007), those that constitute verbless constructions, such as "What a shock!" or "How wonderful!", and those which show interrogative word order, but clearly express exclamatory force. Data is obtained from the Corpus of Early English Dialogues 1560-1760 since this corpus contains both authentic and scripted dialogues and hence allow for comparison.

The corpus data is analyzed in a quantitative manner in order to determine what triggers which use. The main factors taken into consideration are the gender of the respective interlocutors and the subgenre the dialogue belongs to. Additionally, wider discourse aspects, such as the topic of the conversation will be factored in.

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[*]Speaker

The first results show that, overall, exclamatives of the form "How he can say such a thing!" are extremely rare, whereas exclamatory sentences of the form "How beautiful she is!" are the most frequently occurring ones. This is likely due to the fact that sentences of the former type are rather long. Since exclamations are highly affective, speakers of both genders seem to prefer the syntactically shorter version. In most cases, the verbless structures are disfavored in all three constructions; a result which is in opposition to Collin's (2004) findings for written and spoken Present Day English. Therefore, the outcomes of the present study may indicate the beginning of a grammaticalization process.

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