
Exclamations in conversational interaction: The use of wh-exclamatives in assessment sequences in German

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Abstract

Based on the analysis of German everyday conversations, this paper shows how wh-exclamatives ("w-Exklamative") are used to make assessments, i.e. to evaluate referents under discussion. As assessments are a phenomenon at the core of social interaction, they provide ideal grounds for the study of intersubjective dimensions of exclamations.

Most previous work on exclamations adopts an introspective approach, analyzing invented sentences without taking into account empirical data. One of the exceptions is N'af (1996), who advocates an "empirical anchorage" and bases his analysis of wh-exclamatives in German on written language corpora. The present paper follows this empirical line of research, but goes one step further by focusing on the embedding of wh-exclamatives in conversational interaction.

The present contribution draws on recordings of German conversations, taken from the reality TV show Big Brother. Using methods from conversation analysis and interactional linguistics, it analyzes the ways in which wh-exclamatives occur within assessment sequences. Specifically, the paper addresses two interrelated questions: 1) How are assessments that take the form of wh-exclamatives prompted by preceding conversational moves of the interlocutors? 2) What kind of recipient reactions, if any, follow these wh-exclamatives?

So far, the analyses have revealed two sequential patterns that differ with respect to the status of the wh-exclamative as first or second assessment. In the first pattern, a new referent is introduced by one of the participants, which prompts another participant to produce a wh-exclamative that makes a strong first assessment of the new referent. This first assessment is regularly followed by agreeing second assessments of the interlocutors (cf. Pomerantz 1984). Exclamative assessments of this kind seem to be made in contexts where agreeing second assessments are expectable. In the second sequential pattern, the wh-exclamative is produced as a second assessment in response to another participant's first assessment and performs a "scaling up" (Auer/Uhmann 1982: 4) of the intensity of the first assessment. This type of exclamation often terminates the assessment sequence and is followed by a topic shift.

The following conversational extract shows the first sequential pattern. In this example, John announces the motto of the evening ('Chinese evening', line 01) and presents several items for a Chinese dinner (transcription follows the GAT2 conventions by Selting et al.

*Speaker

2009: square brackets indicate overlapping talk, capitals mark accented syllables):

01 Jhn: chinesischer Abend;

Chinese evening

-> 02 Adr: n'a: wie GEI::L;

gosh how cool

03 Ver: [das is SCH'O:N;]

this is great

04 Sbr: [ooh;]

ooh

05 Adr: oh mit WOK,

oh with a wok

06 ich flipp AUS.

I'm freaking out

07 Sbr: oh mit gl'uck dingsdada GL'UCKSkeksen;

oh with fortune cookies

08 [oh wie SCH'ON;]

oh how great

09 Ver: ah DAS [ist ja geil;]

wow this is so cool

The announcement positively surprises the other inhabitants of the Big Brother house and prompts Andrea to produce a wh-exclamative that implements a strong positive assessment of the evening's motto ('gosh how cool', line 02). This first assessment is followed by several agreeing second assessments (e.g. 'this is great', line 03), interjections (e.g. 'ooh', line 04), and exclamations ('wow this is so cool', line 9) of the other participants. This example illustrates the observation that wh-exclamatives – if they do so – perform assessments in specific sequential positions.

This contribution takes a first step towards a new pragmatic perspective on wh-exclamatives that takes into account interactional language use. In doing so, the paper adds to our understanding of the intersubjective dimension of exclamations by demonstrating their importance as a tool for social interaction.

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