

Exclamatives, Degrees and Speech Act Theory

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The talk consists of two parts. The first is an examination and account of the semantic properties of different types of exclamation. The second discusses the ramifications of the account for the semantics of degree and for speech act theory.

I consider exclamations to be a type of speech act, instantiated by utterances like:

- (1) a. (Wow,) Gabe woke up before noon!
- b. (My,) How very early Gabe woke up!
- c. (My,) Did Gabe wake up early!
- d. (Oh,) The amount that boy sleeps!

The most significant generalization is that, while exclamations expressed with declarative sentences (like (1a)) appear to have as their content a proposition, exclamations expressed with WH-constructions (1b), ‘inversion constructions’ (1c), and nominals (1d) appear to have as their content a degree property. The main evidence for this comes from the semantic restrictions of these utterances (and, in the case of exclamations expressed with wh-constructions, restrictions on the WH-phrases that can head them).

I propose that each type of construction (‘proposition exclamations’ like (1a), and ‘exclamatives’ like (1b-d)) are expressed with two different illocutionary force operators, differing in their domain but both mapping to expressions of surprise on the part of the speaker.

The second half of the talk addresses two distinct questions posed by this analysis: Q1: How can an inversion construction and a nominal denote a degree property? and Q2: If the force of an exclamation is endowed by an illocutionary operator, can these operators be embedded, as they appear to be in e.g. *John is surprised at how very early Gabe woke up?*

The work is based in part on my SALT 18 paper ‘A Degree Account of Exclamatives,’ as well as Chapter 4 of my dissertation, *Degree Modification in Natural Language*.