

Looking for the atoms of the left periphery: on the *interface legibility* of interjections and particles

The purpose of this work is to shed light on the interface legibility and processability of minimal syntactic elements - such as interjections, short answers and sentential particles - which play a crucial role in the interpretation and typing of a whole clause.

The syntactic status of interjections has received little or no attention within the recent developments of formal grammar; a hint can be found in Chomsky (2005), where he states that a lexical item can enter into a computation, thereby merging with some syntactic object, iff it is endowed with some property permitting this operation; such a property is its *edge-feature*, a feature that permits it to be merged; under this perspective, interjections are viewed as lexical items lacking an edge-feature; in other words, they can only be full expressions in themselves. This leads however to the (wrong) prediction that interjections, lacking grammatical relations with other words, should always occur alone, which is clearly not the case, as they can be accompanied by a clause which makes explicit their reference, that is the event of the external world which triggers the speaker's mental state. The relevant event can be part of the linguistic or extralinguistic context, as exemplified in (1a) and (1b) respectively:

- (1)a. Boy, [is this story interesting]! b. Boy, [is that guy tall]!

Whenever the associated clause is missing, the interjection expresses an autonomous linguistic act, but since it has an intrinsically deictic character, it can be used only in the presence of the mental state it gives vent to.

In some languages interjections can appear on either periphery of the associated clause, and, if clause final, they are perceived as a kind of afterthought subsequently added to the clause, as exemplified here with Italian and German:

- (2)a. Però, Mario ha superato l'esame! (3)a. Mensch, bist du groß geworden!
 b. Mario ha superato l'esame / però! b. Bist du groß geworden / Mensch!
 [*int*], Mario passed his exam / [*int*]! [*int*] you have become tall / [*int*]!

As to the (syntactic) conditions under which the clause associated to the interjection can be omitted, a first possibility would be to admit that interjections are optionally endowed with an edge-feature; this hypothesis, beside being conceptually unsatisfying, would leave unexplained the contrast between (2-3a) and (2-3b). A more interesting solution to the puzzle is provided by (an adaptation of) Kayne (2005)'s principles of pronunciation, formulated as follows:

- (4)(i) at a given phase level, only the head and material in the c-command domain of the head can (and must) be spelled out;
 (ii) at a given phase level, no material within (or adjoined to) a lower phase can be spelled out.

Adopting (4), we can derive the facts discussed above through the following derivational procedure:

- (a) the narrow syntax component builds the clause associated to the interjection;
(b) the interjection – present in the numeration – is merged as last element; it *does* have an edge feature which allows it to be merged with a syntactic object, so that we obtain a structure where the clause initial interjection heads a left peripheral phase *c*; by (i), this produces (2-3a);
(c) suppose that, *qua* phase head, *c* can also work as a probe triggering internal merge of the whole clause into the specifier of *c* to satisfy some criterial requirement, à la Rizzi; this produces (2-3b), with a clause final interjection, in the languages allowing for this possibility;
(d) assuming further that the interjection itself can raise to a higher (phase) head encoding a *speech event* feature (cf. Sigurðsson 2004 among others) we derive, by (ii), the case in which the clause is left unpronounced.

Case (d) may include both interjections uttered in reply to a statement of the addressee and

interjections in which the addressee coincides with the speaker, that is, in which the speaker is self-addressing the interjection giving vent to an inner state caused by an external situation. The mechanism allowing for deletion of the clause with interjections might conceivably be at work in the case of short answers, like in (5B'):

- (5) A: Did you meet John?
 B': No. B'': No, I didn't (meet John).

According to Chomsky (2005), an expression like 'No' does not crash despite the fact that (it enters a derivation and) its edge feature is not satisfied. Under the present analysis, short answers can be assimilated to interjections, but their analysis would be radically different depending on whether they are accompanied by a complete answer or not. The former possibility, (5B''), may easily fall under case (b) above. On the other hand, (5B') highlights the crucial difference between short answers and interjections: while interjections can be uttered against either a linguistic or a pragmatic context, (short) answers are always uttered as a reply to a question, hence always refer to a linguistic interaction functioning as background. This difference can be captured by (ii) admitting that the edge feature of 'No' in (5B') is indeed satisfied, but has the effect of merging the answer with the syntactic object represented by the question; under this view, (5B') - together with (5A) - would be an instance of (c) rather than an instance of (d).

The syntactic behaviour of interjections and short answers can be profitably compared to the one of sentential particles such as the ones attested in the North-Eastern Italian dialects, which express fine distinctions concerning the speaker's attitude with respect to background presuppositions. Like interjections, these particles can be taken to be merged in head positions of the CP field, and to take a whole clause as their complement. They can either be preceded by a *wh*-item or appear clause final; the two orders can be derived by assuming that the specifier position corresponding to the head they occupy can be the target of the *wh*-item or of the whole clause (cf. Munaro & Poletto 2004):

- (6)a. [FP [SpecFP *wh*_i] [F° particle] [CP t_i [IP]]]
 b. [FP [SpecFP [CP*Wh* [IP]]_i] [F° particle] t_i]]

Interestingly, the clause internal *vs* final position of the particle is relevant for interpretation, in ways that will be made clear. However, a crucial difference with respect to interjections is that these particles can not appear without the associated clause, which suggests that step (d) above is not available in this case, possibly due to the fact that the particle is not an appropriate checker of the highest head targeted by the interjection.

Summing up, a detailed description of these functional elements can lead us to a deeper understanding of clausal typing processes and of the pragmatic features which can be encoded in syntactic structure, thereby shedding new light on the real status of the interface between (left peripheral) syntax and pragmatics; it also enables us to formulate a more fine grained sketch of the "high" part of Rizzi's (1997) split left periphery.

References

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