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Marabini Alessandra | Expressive function and categorization  
of Italian interjections

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**Abstract:** The article deals with such linguistic units as interjections. Examination of these language components affects the sphere of their semantics, classification and structure. Their categorization permits to determine specific features unique to these linguistic phenomena. A hypothesis is put forward about the correlation of interjection locutions and phraseological units. The primary aim is to illustrate the linguistic characteristic of the Italian interjections; a methodological approach to the study of interjections in Italian language is also provided along with a translation analysis carried out during some class activities. Interjections are a part of the speech very independent from the rest of the sentence, because they are inserted in any spoken conversation at the aim of expressing the speaker's inner feelings and emotive reactions. Interjections have peculiar forms: they are either very short words, most of the times two-syllables, or single words taken from other grammar categories like adjectives or nouns. Primary and secondary interjections form phrasal elements, groups of words or propositions. Interjections share some features and functions with the pragmatic phraseological constructions, which can be used by translators to make the enunciation sound more natural. Interjections are not similar in all languages; the languages taken into consideration will be Italian and Russian. In particular, the current article lists a wide spectrum of interjections and related emotive reactions in the Italian language. However, all these emotive reactions are rather subjective and usually they refer to a specific context. Afterwards the research shifts on a class activity, a joint work with some students of the Belgorod State University, Russia. It consisted in reading two dialogues, giving an interpretation to the interjections and trying to implement what learnt. The article concludes with some observations about the linguistic differences between Italian and Russian, about the role of the intonation, a key element to figure out the exact meaning of a given interjection. The last but not the least is the students' personal approach to the interjections.

**Keywords:** interjection; emotive reaction; feeling; phraseological unit; context; language; dialogue; interpretation

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### Introduction

The noun “interjection” comes from the Latin INTERIECTIO, -ONIS ‘insertion, intercalation’, that on its turn comes from the verb INTERICERE ‘to throw or cast between’, to indicate that these expressions are positioned in the middle of a speech without any syntactic ties with the rest of the sentence. They represent invariable words with particular phonic and graphic oscillations that express a sudden reaction of the speaker’s mood. They are emotive forms of expression of the speaker’s attitude to the situation of communication. Due to their ability to synthesize a state of mind with a simple expression, the interjections find greater application in the spoken language of everyday life, since they give liveliness to the speech (Bongi, 2003; Uhriková, 2013: 105-115).

The present work also associates the invariable interjections to some phraseological units, which are similarly fixed expressions. This concerns above all the interjection expressions.

Interjections do not coincide among different languages; therefore, the current article is an attempt of translating these expressions from Italian to Russian, by considering the various interpretations given by groups of students of the Belgorod State University, Russia. This examination will contribute to showing how the students use the Italian interjections in different conversations in class.

### The main content

In order to understand an interjection it is very important to know the communicative context in which it is expressed; indeed, to give a practical example, when the speaker expresses an *ooh* of satisfaction, the interlocutor may understand his communicative intention only by knowing the communicative context in which the interjection is pronounced and the extra-linguistic elements, such as paralinguistic remarks, gestures, facial expressions and body position. Without a reference element, the interlocutor might not understand the reason why the speaker is satisfied (Bongi,

2003; Khaperskiy, Sulkhanišvili, 2014; Ameka, 2006: 743-746).

We can therefore affirm that the interjections have a deictic character, that is, they need to be understood in a context of immediate reference and that, unlike more complex sentences, they can always be found at the present tense speech (it would be unusual to insert them in a speech at the past or in one at the conditional tense). Moreover, due to their character of expressive immediacy, interjections can fit more in subjective and informal contexts in which the speaker can express his own feelings; therefore, they are practically never used in objective and formal situations where the prevalent aim of the speech is that of providing information (Bongi, 2003; Poggi, 2008: 170-186).

Interjections have as well the ability to conveying the meaning of an entire sentence; therefore, they have a holophrastic character, that is they are unitary phonic sequences that cannot be divided into single significant elements and alone they can project an entire linguistic act (indeed ‘holos phrasis’ means ‘entire sentence’) (Poggi, 2008: 170-186). The holophrastic language is very useful in many cases as in the oral interaction when the listener wants to communicate to the speaker that he is following, understanding and finding interesting what the speaker is saying. Instead of saying, for example, “Ho capito” (I got it) (Я понял) or “Non lo sapevo” (I didn’t know this) (я этого не знал), the interjection “Ah” can be used and this will make the conversation smoother and less long and the speaker will express the basic information with the minimum linguistic effort (Lindbladh, 2011: 6; Poggi, 1981; Cuenca, 2000: 29-44).

In the history of Russian linguistics the interjection questions and the relative structures have been studied by M.V. Lomonosov (1775), A.Kh. Vostokov (1859), F.I. Buslaev (1959), A.A. Shakhmatov (1925, 1941), A.I. Smirnitsky (1952, 1959), MD Gutner (1962), V.G. Kostomarov (1959), A.I. Germanovich (1966) and many other Russian linguists. In most of the works, the main issue

was the problem of assigning them a category among the all classes of language units.

The inclusion of interjections into the sphere of the so-called “affective language” is quite often observed; therefore, many authors involved them in purely psychological studies.

The anthropocentric turn in linguistics has given a new perspective to the study of interjections and relative structures: the analysis of the laws and principles of language functioning in close interaction with cognitive processes may uncover the relationship between objective and reflexive reality, with the “person with knowledge” in the centre of this paradigm. The minds of scientists have been concerned with the relationship of interjections and relative structures with the theory of discourse and speech acts, the problems of its role in metasemantics and structural semantics, when viewed as mental structures.

Many other researchers have included onomatopoeias in the class of interjections; however, there should be a demarcation line among different adjacent areas of language phenomena. Some others believe that interjection is alien to the syntactic structure, it is included in the speech, but it works “acontextually” (Yakovleva, 2017: 13-14).

The works on this topic are multiple and various, every author has brought his conception of interjection. However, we can now go ahead by considering the different interjections present in the Italian language, their graphic forms and their usage in the everyday language. This language discussion will be afterwards needed as a basis for my personal analysis: a case study on the different ways of translating the interjections from Italian to Russian and on the connection with phraseological units. The students of the Pedagogical Institute and of the Institute of Intercultural Communication took part to my research firstly by learning the Italian interjections and subsequently by actively using them in the speech with the rest of the class and with the teacher.

The interjections can be divided into two categories: primary and secondary (Bongi, 2003; Renzi, Salvi, Cardinaletti, 1995; Scharonov, 2004; Félix San Vicente, 2007). The binary distinction between primary vs. secondary ones is that the firsts are phonologically aberrant “noise-like” and the seconds phonologically normal “word-like” (Goddard, 2013: 1-27). Indeed, the primary interjections present a graphic peculiarity, the grapheme *h* used in the final position or in the body of the word (*ah*, *oh*, *ehi*, *ahimé*, etc.); particular phonic-graphic oscillations depend on expressive reasons: sometimes the letter *h* can be accumulated to emphasize the mood that one wants to reproduce; indeed, a simple *oh* can become *ohhh* to accentuate the expression of wonder, even if substantially the use of *h* serves to avoid homographies with other words or conjunctions (in this case, *oh* is an interjection and *o* is the conjunction with the meaning of *or*). As already seen in these examples, primary interjections are usually presented under the form of monosyllables or two-syllables. They are independent, non-elliptical utterances and do not occur with other word classes (Bongi, 2003; Cruz, 2017: 299-326).

In contrast, the secondary interjections originate in word-classes (nouns, adjectives, adverbs, verbs); they have an independent semantic value and represent an open category, since these expressions are very multiple (Bongi, 2003; Cruz, 2017: 299-326). Many of them have a conative function, i.e. they act on the recipient of the message to express orders (*Fuori! Silenzio!*), confirmations (*Certo! Sicuro!*), appreciation (*Ottimo! Bravo!*) or to make invitations (*Andiamo! Coraggio!*) while others have a phonic value, to activate the communication channel (*Come? Senti! Pronto?*) (Cignetti, 2010: 671-674).

Both primary and secondary interjections contribute to form phrasal elements, groups of words or propositions (*Santo Cielo! Per amor del cielo! Si figuri! Nemmeno per sogno!*, etc.). As we can see from all these examples, the interjections are often followed

by the exclamation or question mark to accentuate greater intensity, stress and pitch (Bongi, 2003; Jovanović, 2004: 17-28).

At the morphological level, the interjections are grammatical categories; here they can be studied under another perspective, that of pragmatic phraseological units. In the last decades, the study on phraseology has significantly widened thanks to the growing awareness of the “ready to use” nature of a language, matured after the results of the linguistics of corpora and the contributes from the grammar of constructions. From a formal point of view, the phraseological material like idioms can be defined as a steady and autonomous combination of grammatical words, such as conjunctions, particles, prepositions and interjections (Ramusino P. Cotta, 2018: 107)

Interjections like idioms are fixed and their meaning is completed in relation to the context; however, unlike idioms, they do not belong to the sentence, but rather to the lexeme sphere. Furthermore, pragmatic phraseologisms and interjections share the illocutionary function, that is they can fulfil complete speech acts. In particular, interjections are able to perform this function depending on the type of interjection and on situational, paralinguistic, kinetic and proxemics factors, as already mentioned above (Zamora, Alessandro, 2016: 7). In this regard, the words of Poggi (Poggi, 1995: 403-425) in a study focused on the interjections of the Italian language are remarkable. She explains that a specific interjection like *Oh!*, depending on its intonation and context, can play an illocutionary act, expressing agreement or confirmation, which can be paraphrased with *Altro che!*, when it functions as an ironic comment expressing surprise or admiration, it could be paraphrased with *Ma guarda!* or *Non l'avrei mai immaginato!* and other equivalent idioms. In short, phraseological units can be, in some cases, useful for the translator when the target language counterpart lacks some interjections of the source language.

We can now consider various forms of primary interjections in Italian and some related examples. The examples will be shown only in Italian, because a merely translation study will be carried out afterwards. The most common are: *ah, ahi, oh, ohi, uh, eh, ehi, ehm, uhm, ih, beh, mah, bah, boh, veh* and *uffa* (Keleynikova, 2010).

*Ah* brings different meanings; among these, there are:

- 1) reproach, ridicule: “Vedo che la matematica non fa per te. Ah ah!”;
- 2) Anger: “Ah stai proprio esagerando!”;
- 3) Surprise: “Ah adesso capisco, allora sei tu la persona che mi cercava in ufficio l'altro giorno!”;
- 4) Desire: “Ah..come vorrei andare in vacanza, sono esausta!”;
- 5) Sadness: “Sono un po' giù perché il mio cane è morto, ah quanto mi manca.”;
- 6) Satisfaction: “Ah bene, vedo che sei riuscito a fare tutti i compiti”;
- 7) Laugh, irony: “Ah Ah che bella battuta, riesci sempre a farmi morire dalle risate.” (Keleynikova, 2010).

The reference context is really significant, especially in cases like this when only one interjection has so many meanings.

The next interjection in our list is *Ahi*. It indicates sorrow and pain and can be used in ironic sense: “Ahi, che peccato!”, “Ahi, che dolore!”.

*Oh* expresses a wide range of feelings, including wonder, anger, pain, desire, sadness, smile or laugh (in this last case the form is mostly repeated: *oh oh*), but it is also used to draw the interlocutor's attention: “Oh, che bella sorpresa!”.

*Ohi* is used to show pain, but also laugh (*ohi ohi* is preferred in this case): “Ohi, la gamba che male!”.

Similar to *ohi* is *uh*: it can also express pain, but other feelings as well, including displeasure and joy.

It is also significant to look at some combined interjections. *Ahi* and *ohi* are often used with the personal pronouns and their

form will result like this: *ahimè, ahinoi, ahitè, ahilui*. Here are a few suggestions of such interjections: “Ohimè, che dolorosa notizia”; “Ahimè, come sono infelice!” (La grammatica italiana, 2012).

*Eh* constitutes another multiple-meanings interjection. It is used with interrogative intonation and expresses misunderstanding: “Eh? Che hai detto?”. It is also used when the speaker wants to express his unwillingness to answer to the question: “Com’è andata la tua giornata? Eh..” (Keleynikova, 2010). In this case the answer will not be given because the speaker wishes this. *Eh* can be doubled in the form *eh eh*, which expresses laugh both on the side of the interlocutor and on the speaker. They both agree with the joking ways. *Ehi* is used to draw someone’s attention on something: “ehi, sta’ attento” (La grammatica italiana, 2012).

From *eh* derives the form *ehm* (synonym *uhm*) that indicates a doubt, an uncertainty and an embarrassment “ehm, non intendevo dire questo”.

*Ih* proves wonder and when it appears in the repeated form “ih ih”, it simulates a sarcastic laugh or a cry: “Ih, ci sei anche tu!” (La grammatica italiana, 2012).

*Beh* or *be’* are two forms that are truncations of the adverb *bene*. *Beh* is used in sentences that end a conversation, that explicit a point of view and in interrogative sentences: “Be’, meglio così!”, “Beh, che succede?”.

*Bah* and *mah* indicate perplexity, doubt, indifference: “Bah! Proprio non ti capisco!”, “Mah! Che scenata inutile!”.

*Boh* is an interesting interjection. It goes often with the gesture of shrugging the shoulders to indicate uncertainty, disbelief, but also disregard and disapproval: “Boh, non saprei proprio”, “E perché tutto questo? Boh”.

*Veh* and *ve’* are forms that derive originally from the truncation of the verb *vedi*, the imperative form of the verb *vedere* (to see) and are used to call attention or to reinforce a concept: “Veh, che bella roba che hanno fatto!”.

The last one is *uffa* (or *uff*) that is used when the speaker is annoyed, bored or intolerant: “Uffa! È la terza volta che visitiamo questo museo!” (La grammatica italiana, 2012).

The Treccani dictionary lists also other forms, that are rather included in the onomatopoeias. They are: *ps, pst* used to call attention “Pst, vieni qui!”, *puh* and *puah* for disgust, but also contempt and rejection “Puah, che schifo!”, *sciò* is used above all to make animals go away, but also in an ironic sense: “Sciò, cagnaccio, sciò!”. Others are: *st, sst* used to order silence “Sst... parliamo più piano!” and *To’*, a truncated form of the imperative *togli* with the archaic value of *prendi* (take) and it is an invitation to take something, even in a figurative sense: “To’, guarda che roba!” (La grammatica italiana, 2012).

Once we have gone through the uses and forms of the Italian interjections, it is significant to consider the case study conducted at the Belgorod State University (Russia) with the students from the Pedagogical Institute and the Institute of International Communication. They belong to two different groups and have different linguistic levels. During the lesson the students were charged with some conversational dialogues taken from the book “Nuovo Progetto Italiano”, a book of Italian as a foreign language. The teaching method was the following: first the students read the dialogues, then with the help of the teacher they identified and underlined the interjections. They were assigned two texts and the found interjections are: *oh, Senti, Caspita!, Bravo!, Allora, Guarda, Accidenti!, Dichi?, Comunque, Ah, veramente, Ah, Non ti preoccupare* (Martin, Magnelli, 2006b: 10), *ehi, eh, Davvero?, ah, hmm, ah* (Martin, Magnelli, 2006a: 16). I explained them what is the meaning and the emotion beyond these given interjections.

We can now list the interjections occurring in these dialogues between the three protagonists Lorenzo, Claudio and Valeria and between Maria and Gianna.

- *Oh* has the meaning of annoyance after that the speaker had called the interlocutor's name twice (*Oh, che c'è? Perché gridi così?*) (*Oh, what's wrong? Why are you shouting so loudly?*);

- *Senti* means "listen" or "pay attention to what I am going to say now" (*Senti... Ti volevo chiedere una cosa*) (*Listen... I wanted to ask you something*);

- *Caspita!* expresses surprise and happiness; in this case it seems a way of congratulating Claudio for the good mark (*Caspita! Bravo! Allora mi servono assolutamente i tuoi appunti!*) (*Dang! Well done! So I absolutely need your notes*); then, in order to renew his congratulations, Lorenzo uses the interjection *Bravo* that has nowadays penetrated as a loan word into many languages and contexts; *Allora* is used by the speaker when he wants to get straight to the point, in a concise and short way;

- *Guarda* is similar to listen, it serves to attract the attention on the speaker and here also to start explaining why he cannot give him his notes (*Guarda, te li avrei dati volentieri solo che arrivi un po' tardi*) (*Look, I would have willingly given you, but you arrive a bit late*);

- *Accidenti!* appears to be in this dialogue a curse, a way of expressing displeasure and anger (*Accidenti! E adesso come faccio?*) (*Damn! And now what can I do?*);

- *Dici?* is usually used after saying something that the speaker was not thinking about. It expresses doubt, but also awareness that this is a good idea (*Dici? Ok... Credo di avere il suo numero*) (*Do you think so? Ok... I think I have her number*);

- *Comunque* instead is used in a resolute or conclusive tone and it serves to end the conversation (*Comunque, grazie lo stesso*) (*Anyway, thank you*);

- *Ah* is surprise and in this case it is used together with *ciao* as if Valeria was not expecting Lorenzo's call (*Ah, ciao! Come va?*) (*Hey, hello! How are you?*);

- *Veramente* is an expression of doubt, uncertainty (...*Veramente... Avevo appena cominciato a sfogliarli!*) (...*Actually... I just started leafing through them*);

- *Ah* here expresses afterthought and is followed by *se non sbaglio* that confirms the *ah*, because it means the speaker has some doubts about what he had said (*Ah, se non sbaglio, sono una trentina di pagine*) (*Ah, if I am not wrong, the pages are about thirty*);

- *Non ti preoccupare* is an answer with the intent of relaxing the mind of the interlocutor and avoiding doubts, anxiety or fear (*Non ti preoccupare, giusto il tempo di fotocopiarle*) (*Don't worry, just the time to photocopy them*).

- *Ehi* is a response to the greeting of a person and in this dialogue it goes with *ciao* to emphasize also the feeling of wonder (*Ehi, ciao! Come stai?*) (*Hey, hello! How are you?*);

- *Eh* is used to express discontent for something: in that dialogue, both the interlocutors realize they have not been having contact for long time, so one of them says *Eh, sì, hai ragione; eh* in this case goes together with a confirmation sentence that means *Oh, you are right*;

- *Davvero?* expresses surprise and astonishment as a reaction to the news from one of the interlocutor (*Davvero? E dove lavori adesso?*) (*Really? Where are you working now?*);

- *Ah* means pleasure in hearing the news (*Ah, che bello!*) (*Ah, that's great!*);

- *Hmm* explicates here pleasure and cheerfulness (- *I colleghi sono simpatici, il direttore è gentile, carino... - Hmm...*) (- *The colleagues are nice, the director is kind, good-looking... - Hmm...*);

- The last one is again *ah*, but here it can indicate sigh and satisfaction (*Ah, sono fortunata*) (*Ah, I'm lucky*).

After the explanation, the students proposed equivalent interjections in Russian. Different options were given:

1. *Oh* – *a (oh)*

2. *Senti* – слушай (listen)
3. *Caspita!* – ух ты, ого, господи (dang)
4. *Bravo!* – молодец, браво (well done)
5. *Allora* – так (so)
6. *Guarda* – смотри (look)
7. *Accidenti!* – жаль, жалко, вот блин (damn)
8. *Dici?* – думаешь? (do you think so?)
9. *Comunque* – в любом случае (anyway)
10. *Ah* – а, о, ох (hey)
11. *Veramente* – честно говоря, на самом деле (actually)
12. *Ah* – ну (ah)
13. *Non ti preoccupare* – не переживай (don't worry)
14. *Ehi* – хэй, о, эй (hey)
15. *Eh* – а (oh)
16. *Davvero?* – правда? (really?)
17. *Ah* – ах (ah)
18. *Hmm* – ммм (hmm)
19. *Ah* – ну, а, о (ah)

Afterwards, they worked in pairs and invented and wrote down dialogues, by using the interjections studied. Every pair was assigned an interjection and built up a conversation; one example is the following:

- *Che cosa hai fatto per le vacanze?*
- *Niente di interessante, ho dormito molto, ho aiutato i miei genitori. E tu?*
- *Ho letto una decina di libri.*
- *Caspita! Brava!*
- *Grazie.*
- *What did you do for your holidays?*
- *Nothing special, I slept a lot, helped my parents. And you?*
- *I read around ten books.*
- *Dang! Well done!*
- *Thanks.*

### Conclusions

This dialogue, as well as the others, reflects what the students have learnt and it is an evidence of the prompt usage of the everyday Italian language. They have created straight dialogues and used impulsive and immediate expressions. This exercise has

been therefore useful and interesting: it affirms what has been mentioned above, that is languages bring different interjections to express emotive reactions.

Apart from learning and implementing their knowledge, they have carried out activities of translation. The prevalent translating technique had been literal and the strategy of substitution with a phraseological unit had not been adopted; nevertheless, it could be a stimulating starting point for further future studies.

Some other issues have emerged. The first one concerns the different pronunciation of the grapheme *h*. In Russian *h* is always pronounced, while in Italian it is always a diacritic grapheme (Piekarz, 2011: 359-365); for this reason, *h* is replaced by the grapheme *x*. However, *x* is not always present in the Russian forms since there is no full binary equivalence between the spectrum of the interjections in two languages.

Considerations on the translation outcomes are:

- the Italian *dici?* has been translated with *думаешь?*, which in Italian can rather sound like *pensi?* – *do you think so?*
- The correspondent of *accidenti* has been *жаль, жалко* whose translation in Italian is *peccato* – *what a pity!*
- The suggestion for *veramente* has been *честно говоря* that is the correspondent of *a dire il vero* – *actually*.

These differences indicate that there are not always correspondences when switching from one language to another and that some interjections can be used in more than one context in Italian or in Russian. *Accidenti*, for example, is used as a curse, but also as an exclamation of admiration, amazement, but the same cannot be said for *жаль, жалко*. Moreover, some students have also proposed *вот блин*, which is a really widespread interjection in the contemporary Russian that can express any emotion, from annoyance to delight passing through irritation, surprise, admiration and approval. It clearly appears in the speech of almost any person, in any commu-

nicative act (Bogdanova-Beglaryan, 2014: 76-82).

Another significant issue concerns the semantic variations of a given interjection. In the discussion with the students, multiple interpretations of one interjection have been found, namely of the interjection *hmm*; the intonation has definitely helped them out finding the right correspondent in Russian. We have seen that *hmm* can be used to express enjoyment for food, perplexity or attraction for someone; in the text the last meaning is conveyed. Thus, in order to distinguish this particular use from others, it has become important to use a specific intonation.

From the current analysis, it has also emerged that the use and interpretation of interjections is rather personal. The students discussed different interjections in Russian and their opinions about the proper usage were different. This might be a confirmation of the fact that the interjections are rich and deep in the communication of our mental reality. Recognizing and mastering the use in everyday communication makes a constituent element of every speaker's linguistic competence and performance.

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