Levels of meaning in exclamatives: an experimental study
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Background. Since the initial studies in the seventies by [1] the exact categorization of the meanings conveyed by exclamatives has been a matter of debate, particularly concerning two main aspects: factivity and high degree. Hence, an exclamative sentence like (1) is commonly assumed to involve the ascription of a property (2) and a high degree meaning (3).

(1) How tall Mary is!
(2) Mary is tall.
(3) Mary is tall beyond expectation.

As for the ascription of a property in (2), [2] argued that it was a presupposition. However, such a position became challenged in the late 2000’s by [3, 4] (but see [5], for a reassessment of Grimshaw’s position [2]). As for the high degree meaning (3), while [6, 7] argue that it is a presupposition following from the presence of a higher order illocutionary operator, [8] analyze it as a conventional implicature (hence, pragmatic in nature) deriving from the semantic operation of widening involved in exclamatives.

Reframing the debate. While the debate described in the previous section has been lively and interesting on theoretical grounds, it has been alien to the current development of experimental semantics and pragmatics, and, particularly to the studies on the role of cancellation and projection in determining the levels of meaning of utterances (e.g. [9, 10]). While at-issue meaning contributes to the Question Under Discussion (QUd), so that they can deny or correct a previous utterance, presuppositions (aka projective meaning) cannot address the QUD:

(4) Some of the students came to the party. In fact, I believe all of them came.
(5) #Some of my students came to the party. In fact, I regret that all of them came.

At issue content can cancel the scalar implicature in (4), but the presupposed content in (5), cannot.

Methods. We translated these insights into three experiments to categorize the meanings involved in Spanish degree exclamatives. The first two experiments were designed to test whether the meanings in (2) and (3) were cancellable, by means of an interpretation task (experiment 1) and an evaluation task (experiment 2). Experiment 3 was designed to test, by means of an interpretation task, whether the high degree meaning in (3) was subject to projection in contexts typically blocking presupposition projection [11]: if the meaning was inherited by the whole class, we could conclude that it was a conventional implicature [9,12].

Experiment 1. 37 Spanish first course undergraduate students were asked to read a series of slides involving an interpretation task and a confidence evaluation. All the target items shared the following structure. First, a two line dialogue between Pedro and Julia, where Pedro always uttered a degree exclamative (e.g. How tall Mary is!) and Julia always replied denying such an utterance ambiguously (No, that’s not true). Then participants were faced with two options for interpreting Julia’s reply: a denial of the property (e.g. “Mary is not tall”) or a denial of the high degree (e.g. “Mary is tall, but not that much”).
**Experiment 2.** The second experiment aimed at testing the naturalness of different denials of an exclamative sentence like *¿Qué alto es Juan!* ‘How tall John is!’ Unlike in experiment 1, we presented 27 Spanish last course undergraduate students with three different replies that they had to evaluate regarding a Likert scale: (A) assertion of the property plus denial of the high degree (“Yes, that’s true, but John is not so tall”); (B) denial of the property (“No, that’s not true: John is not tall”); and (C) denial of the high degree (“No, that’s not true: John is tall, but not so tall”).

The option judged as most natural would be the best candidate for at-issueness.

**Experiment 3.** 34 Spanish first course undergraduate students were asked to read a series of slides involving an interpretation task. All the target items shared the following structure: a direct quotation by Pedro, where Pedro always uttered a conditional sentence, where the antecedent casted doubt on content that was presupposed in the consequent (e.g. Pedro said: “If Mary is strong, how strong she is, then!”). Then participants were faced with two options for interpreting Pedro’s belief: he believed that the individual had the property in a high degree or he wasn’t sure about it.

**Results.** The results of experiment 1 showed that the denial of the property ascription (“Mary is not Adj”) was perceived as far more natural (68.91%) than the denial of the high degree (“Mary is Adj, but not that much”) (31.08%), with an average confidence level of 5.12 over 7.

The results of experiment 2 showed that denial of the property was judged quite natural (5.72 over 7), in accordance with the results of experiment 1. On the other hand, denial of the high degree part was judged very differently regarding the form of the answer: whereas positive endorsement plus denial of the high degree (“Yes, that’s true, but X is not so Adj”) was perceived as the least natural (an average of 3.24 over 7), negative denials of the high degree (“No, that’s not true: X is not so Adj”) were judged as the most natural option (a 5.78 average).

The results of experiment 3 showed that speaker easily projected the high degree property to the whole utterance: on average, they allowed projection on 68.20% of the cases (16 crucial items).

**Discussion.** On the whole, our research contradicted the received wisdom, since [2] that the core property ascription in exclamatives is presupposed. Rather, we have found in both experiments that this meaning is clearly at-issue, and hence amenable to denial. In contrast, the high degree meaning has been found much harder to deny (but not impossible). Moreover, the fact that the high degree meaning was able to project in contexts blocking presupposition projection seems to confirm the position by [8] that this meaning is a conventional implicature, rather than a presupposition. These results pave the way for building a finer-grained analysis of the levels of meaning in exclamatives, from a solid empirical ground, while raise serious doubts on long-standing assumptions on the limits between semantics and pragmatics in exclamatives.

**References**