



# *Emotive Interjections in British English*

*A corpus-based study on variation  
in acquisition, function and usage*

Ulrike Stange

**Studies in Corpus Linguistics**

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# Emotive Interjections in British English

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## **Volume 75**

Emotive Interjections in British English. A corpus-based study on variation in acquisition, function and usage  
by Ulrike Stange

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A corpus-based study on variation in acquisition,  
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Ulrike Stange

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*To Timm and Valentin*



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# Abbreviations

ages	year;month.day; e.g. 2;3.17 → 2 years, 3 months and 17 days year;month; e.g. 2;3 → 2 years and 3 months
ADS	adult-directed speech
AG	age group
AS	adult speech
BNC	<i>British National Corpus</i>
CHI	child
CHILDES	<i>Child Language Data Exchange System</i>
CDS	child-directed speech
CS	child speech
df	degree(s) of freedom
EFL	English as a foreign language
INV	investigator
IO	interjectional occurrences
LPD	<i>Longman Pronunciation Dictionary</i>
MOT	mother
N/A	not available
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
OED online	digital version of the OED; <a href="http://www.oed.com">http://www.oed.com</a>
pmw	per million words
sd	standard deviation
UnkSp	unknown speaker



# Symbols used in transcripts

[*]	ungrammatical form
[?]	best guess at a word
@o	onomatopoeia
#3	pause; figure indicates length of pause in seconds
0	actions without speech
+/.	interruption by interlocutor
+//.	self-interruption
:	lengthening of word
%par	para-linguistic information
%com	extra-linguistic information
[/]	restart
[=!text]	para-linguistic material, e.g.[=!cries]
[%text]	comment
&	phonological fragment of word
xxx	unintelligible speech
yyy	phonological coding for items deviant from 'normal' words
www	untranscribed material
[...]	omitted speech material irrelevant to analysis

See MacWhinney (2000) for full details.



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## Introduction

After centuries of neglect due to their disputed status as linguistic items, interjections like *Ouch!* or *Whoops!* have started to attract considerable interest over the last couple of decades. Slowly but steadily, they are gaining more ground as subjects of linguistic research. The controversy surrounding interjections stems from the fact that they exhibit a number of particularities that go counter to what is perceived as linguistic. These characteristics include, among other things, their virtually being restricted to the spoken domain, their potentially containing extra-linguistic sounds (for instance the sequence of post-alveolar clicks found in English *Tut-tut!*), their occasionally violating phonotactic constraints (*Psst!* has no vocalic nucleus), their predominantly serving as reflexlike expressions of emotion, their not being primarily designed to be communicative, as well as their systematically lacking syntactic integration into utterances. They are generally seen as spontaneous verbal expressions in reaction to a certain event or stimulus, and as having little in common with ‘normal’ spoken language.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the increasing interest in this peculiar linguistic phenomenon, interjections still require a consensual definition. Up to the present, there is not even agreement on which items should fall into the category of interjections in the first place. In addition to that, there still is no unanimity as regards their being a part of language or not. This discussion is fuelled by the fact that interjections exhibit heterogeneity in form: they may be closely linked to gestures and body reflexes (*Ugh!*), but also to ‘proper language’ in that they look and sound like ordinary words (*Yuck!*), and there are also interjections found between these two extremes (*Ups!*) (cf. Wilkins 1992: 122).

To date, there is still a distinct lack of exhaustive descriptions regarding the specifics of interjections in language use based on empirical data (cf. Kowal & O’Connell 2004: 5; cf. also Norrick 2015: 249). As a result, a wide chasm exists between the meanings of interjections as represented in theoretical accounts based on introspection and the actual range of functions in which speakers use them. To say that *Ow!* is an expression of pain, for instance, is very vague. I will show that this interjection can refer to pains of various nature (namely experienced pain,

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1. *Spontaneous* is used here in the sense of: ‘said in a natural and often sudden way and without a lot of thought or planning’ (Webster 2014 – *spontaneous*).



imaginary pain and anticipated pain), and it can also be used to refer to someone else's pain (no matter whether it is real, imaginary or anticipated). Additionally, it is also perfectly possible to produce *Ow!* or *Ouch!* to express sympathy on hearing unpleasant stories (e.g. the use of an interjection of pain as a response to a friend telling you she complained bitterly about her boss on the phone, unaware that he was standing right behind her, listening in). As can be seen, interjections are multifaceted in their range of functions, and it will prove beneficial to study this variation in use in more detail.

### 1.1 Aims and scope

This book focuses on so-called emotive interjections; i.e. those interjections that spontaneously reveal how the speaker feels (e.g. *Ow!*, *Ugh!*, *Wow!*, cf. Nübling 2004: 13). As a result, the discussion of other types of interjectional expressions (like *Ah!*, *Psst!* or *hm*) is limited to the outline of how interjections are categorised (Chapter 2.2). The present case study then explores the use of selected emotive interjections (expressing pain, disgust and surprise) from three different perspectives, viz. child speech, child-directed speech and adult-directed speech.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, it aims at detecting and identifying differences in the use of these interjections both as regards their frequency of use and in which contexts speakers produce them. Moreover, this study will address the questions of how children acquire these interjections and how they use them throughout early childhood (between the ages of 1;8 and 3;0), because existing studies on the acquisition of interjections have merely scratched the surface (Stange 2009, Asano 1997, Meng & Schrabback 1994). Accordingly, the present case study investigates the following range of phenomena:

- a. the acquisition of interjections in early childhood (in particular their age of acquisition and the contexts in which they first occur in child speech)
- b. the use of interjections in child speech (with a focus on any changes pertaining to their use in terms of frequency and range of functions during early childhood)

---

2. Child-directed speech is a "simplified register" (Ferguson 1977) that typically displays a number of prominent features. These include, for instance, the use of simple syntax and redundancy of utterances (cf. Snow 1972: 561), as well as the use of diminutives, the substitution of difficult sounds with easier ones, exaggerated intonation and accentuation, higher pitch and the use of proper names instead of personal pronouns (cf. Ferguson 1977: 222f.). See the seminal work of Snow (1972) and Snow & Ferguson (1977) for details on motherese.