

## SMALL WORDS – BIG ISSUES: THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL RELEVANCE OF KHOESAN INTERJECTIONS

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**ABSTRACT** Interjections are ubiquitous in most languages but they have for long been neglected by linguists. To anthropologists they are of particular relevance because they shift our attention from “sentences” (as abstract units found in grammars) to “utterances” (that is, real world units) which are indexical since they can only to be understood in the context of speech events. As bridges between language and the lived world they often transport emotive contents and a sense of what the speaker feels. As I will show with examples from the †Akhoe Hailom corpus, interjections have to be learned from communicative interaction and they are rich entry points into what Sugawara has defined as the point of departure for anthropological research, namely “embodied experience”.

**Key Words:** Interjections; Embodied experience; Conversation; Pragmatics; Khoesan.

### 1. *EETO*: INTRODUCTION

When I was visiting scholar in Kyoto, I never properly learned Japanese, which I do regret. I regret it for the general reason that it made it more difficult for me to understand Japanese ways of life and for the more specific reason of not being able to read the major works of my Japanese colleagues such as Kazuyoshi Sugawara. The present contribution has received considerable inspiration from Sugawara’s works that were translated into English. At the same time this paper is also testimony to the fact that there are other important modes of gaining access to another way of life apart from written texts and propositional language. Architecture is one of these modes of cultural access (see Taut, 2010) and so is gardening and the experience of place and space more generally (Ito, 1999; Mather et al., 1998). Another mode of access are interjections. For instance, while staying in Japan I have heard (and, finally, learned) many different ways of saying “...*eeto*...”. Depending on the situation this interjection can range from “*eeeeto*” (with the length of the initial vowel being the important marker) to “*etto*” (with the middle consonant being more or less pronounced). The people I encountered used this interjection in many ways and Sadanobu and Takubo (1995) have provided a detailed analysis of “*eeto*” in Japanese. What mother tongue speakers of Japanese may not realize is the degree to which “*eeto*” is one of the recognizable expressions that speakers of Japanese also freely interject into the flow of conversation when they speak English to foreigners. Often it is like a rock of Japanese sticking out from a stream of English words. In many contexts I learned to roughly translate it as: [“Hm, these Europeans have strange ideas; what shall I answer to this; I do have a clear position about this but I am

not sure how to translate it to my counterpart without causing too much offence.”] This is a rendering for the short and crisp “*eto*”. For the elongated “*eeeeetttoo*”, however, the rendering easily becomes more complex as in: “Hm, curious, these Europeans really have strange ideas, indeed; what on earth am I expected to answer to this, or to do about it for that matter; life could be so easy if we all shared the same background knowledge but in this particular case there is probably no proper way to convey what I want to say to my counterpart since he lacks the necessary background to fully understand it; he will either think I am impolite or that I cannot express myself properly; isn’t anyone else around who could reply in my place?”] The number of initial vowels in “*eto*” is adjusted according to the time that the speaker deems necessary for someone to show up or something to happen that would provide an exit option from a difficult situation. Thus, it became clear to me that interjections were a key area for understanding Japan, but it was also obvious that mastering interjections, understanding their implications and the implicatures (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Grice, 1989) that they can provoke, is a formidable task. In this contribution I want to explore both, the opportunities and the challenges of studying interjections with regard to languages about which I share some knowledge with Sugawara and his colleagues, namely the Khoesan languages of southern Africa.

## 2. SMALL UNITS WITHIN SMALL LANGUAGES

All Khoesan languages (previously spelled “Khoisan”) are small languages with respect to the number of speakers across southern Africa. Arguably, therefore, Khoesanists are to be excused for the fact that there is not much research and literature to this date about interjections in these languages. Hagman’s grammar of Khoekhoe, for instance, does not list interjections as a category *sui generis* but covers some of them under the categories “response forms” and “simple adverbs” (Hagman, 1977). With a host of different languages and few resources available, other features of Khoesan languages may have appeared to be more pressing research priorities than the investigation of interjections. However, the lack of attention given to interjections is much more widely spread, since they have long been disregarded as peripheral in linguistics and have only been re-evaluated since the 1990s. To E. Sapir interjections were “among the least important of speech elements”, a “functionally insignificant proportion of the vocabulary of language” (Sapir 1921: 5) because, like Müller (see below), he was arguing against theories that aimed to explain the origin of all language out of interjections. “The interjections of Japanese and English”, he commented, are a product of “a common natural prototype, the instinctive cries, and are thus unavoidably suggestive of each other” (1921: 4–5). In sum, the consensus was for a long time that “interjections are purely emotive words which have no referential content” (Quirk et al., 1972: 413 quoted in Wilkins, 1992: 120). At the same time, some early linguists realized the rich potential of interjections that is readily obvious to most lay speakers. Müller noted back in 1862: “One short interjection may be more powerful, more to the point, more eloquent than a long speech. In fact, interjections,

together with gestures, the movements of the muscles of the mouth, and the eye, would be quite sufficient for all purposes which language answers with the majority of mankind” (Müller, 1862: 368). However, he also noted that “language begins where interjections end” (Müller, 1862: 367) and it took more than another century before research on interjections took off. In the 1990s Felix Ameka stated that interjections were “the universal yet neglected part of speech” (Ameka, 1992). They were very frequently heard in conversations but very rarely mentioned in grammars. Ameka, together with several collaborators, devoted a whole special issue of the *Journal of Pragmatics* to interjections. He also noted that research was particularly limited when it came to the study of interjections in languages outside Europe, in small languages like those of the Khoesan cluster.

As researchers begin to look more carefully at interjections they realize that a more general principle of anthropological analysis applies, namely that interjections feature in “small places” but actually involve “large issues” (Eriksen, 1995). In ethnography this refers to the fact that even when studying a small village the researcher is not only describing that one village and its inhabitants but he or she is in fact dealing with a larger issue such as gender relations, emerging inequalities, the ways in which children learn about the world, how skills develop or how some other key problem of human existence is being solved. The same applies to interjections: They present themselves as small lexical forms, small units, whether in large or in small languages. But they allow insights into the “large issues” of language and culture, namely how the world is perceived, how speakers perceive themselves, their emotional and cognitive status, and their relationship with one another. Moreover, interjections are challenges to the established division of labour between linguists and anthropologists. Interjections suggest that there may not be a real dividing line between language and other cultural activities, and they thereby touch upon the “larger issue” of how we ought to carry out research on language and culture.

### 3. ONE OR TWO THINGS THAT I HAVE LEARNED ABOUT †AKHOE HAILIOM INTERJECTIONS

The disregard of interjections in most grammars and much of linguistic theory is somewhat surprising for the field worker because in the process of learning a foreign language interjections should be considered “the ethnographer’s best friends”. After all, given their frequency and some of their lexical properties (lack of inflection etc.) they lend themselves to the early efforts of the novice speaker trying to make sense what is going on. Through them, the language learner begins to understand the attitudes, emotions and states of minds of interlocutors. And, conversely, to master the use of interjections is a way to readily participate in conversation and interaction even if one’s knowledge of the larger lexicon and the grammar is otherwise limited. Anyone who spends some time with †Akhoe Hailom speakers would soon start to notice some of these interjections that I shall be dealing with in this contribution: “*Mboko*”, “*Akua*”, “*Goma*”, “*Hia*”, “*Hana*”, “*Etse*”, “*!Xütse*”. But how is one to recognize an interjection when one

begins to learn a language? David Wilkins has suggested to define an interjection as “a conventional lexical form which conventionally constitutes an illocutionary utterance of its own” (Wilkins, 1992: 124). While this is a helpful starting point it also immediately raises a number of questions that I will deal with in this contribution, making reference to data that I have collected with the help of †Akhoe Hailom in northern Namibia between 1990 and 2014.

#### 4. IOBEE: THE CONVENTIONALIZATION OF INTERJECTIONS

As a “conventional lexical form”, interjections are not just any sound that individual speakers may use to fill a gap in their speech flow since to be of conventional form implies that these are transgenerational (or at least supra-individual) cultural items if they are to fit the definition. If they are “conventional” they are public and social in nature which is good news insofar as that allows us to document and investigate them through direct observation. However, this observation is more likely to occur in natural conversation than in language elicitation which may be one of the reasons why anthropological linguists (and linguistic anthropologists) are more involved in the study of interjections than traditionally trained linguists. The same applies to the description of interjections as “illocutionary utterances” which already indicates that we are dealing not with isolated lexical items but with full-blown actions. These are not necessarily directed at a specific addressee, but can be directed at the world at large with the intention to change some aspect of that world.

One of my best friends among the †Akhoe Hailom during my field research in the 1990s was an old man who died some years ago. As is the case with all †Akhoe Hailom he was known under a number of names. He was called “Dādāb”, the first name given to him shortly after birth, but he was also known as “Lazarus”, a name he received when he got baptized as an adult and also as “Kalutenda”, a name in the language of the neighbouring Bantu-speaking Owambo. While I was doing my main research he acquired yet another name, namely “Iobeba” which was derived from the fact that he often used the rather idiosyncratic interjection “*iobee*” which I translated to myself mostly as “that it the way it is” or “yes, thank you”, depending on the context. Now, “*iobee*” got conventionalized to the degree that it became his personal name that was often used around my main field site in 1991–92 but since Dādāb/Lazarus/Kalutenda/Iobeb has died I cannot recall to have heard it again. In other words, interjections point at a general lesson that is often forgotten in the study of language (and other actions) namely that “conventional” is a matter of degree. We could even go as far as saying that interjections are a reminder of the fact that language is above all a means to change the world, for instance when naming and thereby individualizing persons. At the same time, as the world continues to change, for instance as persons die, this has feedback effects on the use of language. In most cases these processes are not as easily observable as in the emergence and disappearance of “*iobee*” in spoken †Akhoe Hailom but it is likely that in principle this applies more widely. What is, or becomes, conventionalized language can only be established in hindsight and it is part of an underlying continual process of language

production that should therefore also take center-stage in our work, giving attention to language as a social process rather than a given structure.

## 5. *AM'A*: THE UBIQUITY OF INTERJECTIONS

Probably the first interjection that any novice learner of †Akhoe Hailom is likely to come across is “*am'a*” which in many contexts would be translated as an emphatic “True!” or “Really!”. It is ubiquitous because it comes in a whole range of forms. Here are some:

- am'a* or *ama* (most common forms)
- amase* (with adverbial suffix)
- amaba* (nominalized)
- amaige* (with “*i ge*” [it is])
- ama-amase* (reduplicated)
- amabe* (with adjectival suffix [?])
- amaais* (in a compound with “*ais*” “face/place”)
- ama-e* (with question particle, “isn’t it?”)
- amatama* (negated)

From a grammarian’s point of view, then, “*ama*” is productive since there is a host of derivations to be found. However, when looking at natural conversation the variation increases with the multifold uses of the term to the extent that we are no longer dealing with a linear derivation from a single prototypical form but rather with a field in which a set of related interjections enrich one another with meaning. The main point here is to underline the conversational and pragmatic productiveness of many interjections that goes beyond grammatical productiveness. Even though they may have one prototypical form and although they do not typically take on inflections like verbs or nouns, interjections like “*ama*” still regularly occur together with other lexical items and derivational affixes. In other words, even ethnographers and linguists who do have succeeded to collect a list of interjections have probably only scratched the surface with regard to the number of interjections and the contexts in which they are used and made to fit the situational requirements. This is certainly true for †Akhoe Hailom. Interjections are productive in this double sense and they provide a richer source of data than initially meets the eye but which only becomes evident when we turn to corpora of naturally occurring conversation.

## 6. *HANA*: THE SMALLER THE WORD THE LARGER THE CONTEXT

Interjections are small but they often carry a lot of meaning. They carry meaning about the emotions of a speaker, his or her attitude towards the interlocutor, towards what has been said, towards the situation at large. This richness makes interjections interesting objects of study for anthropologists who generally are interested in the study of social relations, identities and emotions. However, in terms of research this

feature of interjections also creates problems. If interjections are midgets with regard to their linguistic form, they may be said to be giants of context. They are small in the sense that they do not form part of a large grammaticalized category (such as noun classes), nor do they frequently undergo grammatical transformations. They do not have conjugations or declinations and are typically not part of compounds. In other words, given their linguistic “smallness” they do not contain much information in their actual form, as for example a long propositional phrase with various clauses, with subjects, objects and verbs etc. would. Interjections constitute their meaning largely from the situational context in which they are uttered. The †Akhoe Hailom interjection that illustrates this point very well is “*hana*” (“Is it?”).

To know what “*hana*” refers to, one has to know what happened before it was uttered. But this “before” can stretch considerably, back in time and across speakers and domains. In a typical †Akhoe Hailom conversation in a camp there are several threads of conversation going on at the same time. Since everyone can more or less hear everyone else and since parallel talk is generally accepted and not suppressed or considered impolite, any particular “*hana*” can refer to a whole range of speakers and their utterances across different topics and conversations. Sometimes “*hana*” is even used as a reaction to what animals do or as a general non-directional expression of slight disbelief or surprise based on non-observable internal sentiments of a speaker. This makes the context that may be relevant to be included in an appropriate understanding of “*hana*” very large, if not endless in the sense that we realize that we may not have a full grasp of everything that is said around us. Even for a native speaker chances are that one might have missed whatever it was that may have made someone say “*hana*”. It may not be one particular previous utterance or action but it may refer to the cumulative sum of several statements (possibly by several speakers) that were made in the run-up to someone saying “*hana*”. To linguistic anthropologists this is not altogether new since they have always insisted that language has to be recorded and documented “in context”, in particular the context of speaking and the context of situation (see Malinowski, 1935; Bloch, 2012: 160). But there is more to it. It is easy to claim that context is ultimately endless. This has become a commonplace in the interpretation of texts (which may be contextualized with reference to other texts and the contextualization itself leading to an infinite regress). This would be true if we were to treat an interjection such as “*hana*” as being the same across all instances in which it is uttered. However, what the study of interjections suggests is that every instance of “*hana*” has to be studied, first and foremost, with regard to the specific circumstances in which it was uttered, with reference to the particular persons involved at that moment, within earshot of the speaker and with reference to whatever speech act preceded the utterance. Hence, the theoretical unboundedness of context becomes pragmatically and historically limited not only for speakers and listeners but also for those who set out to analyse what is happening and what is being said as presented by conversational analysis. While interjections underline the anthropological insistence on “studying context” they also provide some guidelines as to where to start and how to set the limits of relevance in this pursuit. As phenomenologists would have it, the (inter)corporeality of speakers and situations sets limits of relevance to the context that emerge when language is treated as utterances in communicative processes between bodily beings rather than as a body of texts.

## 7. *ETSE*: FROM SENTENCES TO UTTERANCES

Another common interjection in †Akhoe Hailom is “*etse*” which may be translated into English as “blimey” but literally is more like “hey you”. It is likely that this form got “interjectionalized” from a composition bringing together a vocative “*e*” and the personal pronoun second person singular, “-(*t*)*se*”, “you” (male). Similar vocative forms of the personal pronoun are found in other Khoesan languages including Glui and Glana. Again it is likely that “*etse*” would be treated as one lexical entry (together with “*ese*”, when addressing a woman) if it was included in a dictionary. It may be considered to be a very short sentence, an instantiation of the abstract unit “sentence” of which grammars and language descriptions consist of. However, in the real world we are not dealing with abstract units but with contextualized units or “utterances” and it is easy to show how “*etse*” constitutes a number of utterances, in fact fairly diverse utterances. There is the declarative “*etse*” when saying things like “Blimey, that is really remarkable”. Then there is the exclamative “*etsee*” when shouting out things like “Hey, stop what you are doing!” And there is the interrogative/evocative “*etse?*” as in “Are you serious about this?” The differences between these different forms of “*etse*” are lost if we think of it as “a lexical item” or “a sentence”. Interjections such as “*etse*” point towards utterances and they underline that the utterances of spoken language in context are primary while the abstract notion of sentences and lexemes are secondary derivations. Moreover, the focus on utterances allows us to see similarities where grammars and lexica present isolated sentences and words. In the case of “*etse*” we see that there are other values, quite distinct lexically, that can be substituted for these multiple “*etse*” utterances, for instance “*khūtse*” (“My God!”) or “*Elotse*” (“Oh Lord!”, derived from Christian discourse). In other words, what appears to be the same, turns out to be very different and distinct (three ways—declarative, exclamative and evocative—of uttering “*etse*”) and what appears to be diverse (three words “*etse*”, “*khutse*” and “*Elotse*”) can become interchangeable at the level of utterances. Therefore, when in doubt about the contents or direction of a communicative process, or when the analysis of that process becomes problematic, we want to take the argument back beyond the abstract units to the original utterances.

## 8. *MBOKO*: NO LANGUAGE IS AN ISLAND

It has been observed before (Wilkins, 1992: 122) that interjections sometimes include phonologically or otherwise “aberrant” features that are otherwise not found in language. Among †Akhoe Hailom speakers “*mboko*” is a case in point. It includes the “*mb*” sound which is found in neighbouring Bantu and European languages and in borrowed terms from these languages (as in “*mburu*” for “to plough”) but which otherwise does not occur in Khoesan languages. In fact, we can observe the same with regard to clicks in European languages. Click sounds are a hallmark of Khoesan languages and Khoesan languages are usually considered to be unique in having clicks in their language. Neighbouring languages

such as Xhosa have incorporated clicks but even beyond that we do find clicks in interjections of many European languages, for instance the double dental click (“| |” or “*tsetse*”) of slight disapproval or the single or double lateral click (“| |”) of making a horse go. These observations help to de-exoticize the languages of Khoesan peoples but more importantly interjections are also forceful reminders that the boundaries that we draw around individual languages (or cultures for that matter) are just that, boundaries that we draw around sections of an open process. On the ground, we find a host of manners of speaking distributed across individual speakers and across these boundaries. Insofar as speech production constitutes clusters we may use the notion of “language A” versus “language B” as a manner of speaking. But we should not forget that, phenomenologically, these are constructions set to separate a flow of actions and interactions that we experience as more or less seamless as we live our biographies in history. Interjections are a reminder of this fact, and in particular the interjections used by Khoesan speakers who typically are “multilingual” or who do not necessarily consider different modes of expression as different “languages” but simply as different ways of putting things.

## 9. *ĩ-ĩ*: LANGUAGE AS ANOTHER FORM OF EMBODIED EXPERIENCE

The grammatical status of many expressions as interjections may be a matter of debate amongst linguistic specialists of any particular language. However, there is one set of interjections that linguists are likely to recognize first and foremost and these are “yes” and “no” (plus, in some cases, “maybe” and “don’t know”). Take Hudson’s grammar of Walmajarri (1978), a language of Aboriginal Australia, in which interjections form the very last item in her word list (“Z- Interjection”) which reads as follows:

- |                 |                 |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1. yes          | <i>yuguayi</i>  |
| 2. no           | <i>ngajirta</i> |
| 3. I don’t know | <i>ngurrpa</i>  |

In †Akhoe Hailom, the corresponding entry would read:

- |                 |                |
|-----------------|----------------|
| 1. yes          | <i>ĩĩ</i>      |
| 2. no           | <i>ĩ - ĩ</i>   |
| 3. I don’t know | <i>lu ta a</i> |

This is correct as far as it goes, but at the same time it is highly misleading. As with many other languages the use of these specific interjections regularly goes with facial or other bodily gestures of various sorts. While nodding and shaking one’s head are the common features that go with “yes” and “no” in English, in †Akhoe Hailom it is the raising of one’s eyebrows (for “yes”) and putting on frown wrinkles at the base of the nose (for “no”). These facial gestures can either accompany the use of linguistic interjections or they can replace them



and both may be mixed freely within the very same conversation by the very same speakers. Thus, in these interjections and their gestural counterparts we have the clearest evidence for the claim that there is no real dividing line between language made of sounds on the one hand and other forms of activities on the other hand (see Grice, 1989: 341; Wilkins, 1992: 123). This works both ways: Firstly, interjections and their non-linguistic counterparts are similar enough to suggest that language should be studied as embodied practice. Secondly, non-linguistic expressions may be usefully analyzed in terms of linguistic utterances. There is no natural boundary between the two. Whatever boundary we use, it is introduced for specific analytical purposes but not because the division is “out there” from the start. Interjections therefore underline the critique that phenomenological theory in its various ways has raised with regard to a dualism between language and culture, code and practice, cognition and behaviour.

There is more evidence from the yes/no interjections to support this point: When carrying out systematic questioning that involved yes/no replies (along the lines of decision tree research as outlined by Gladwin (1989) many †Akhoe Hailom speakers did not respond with either “*ihi*” or “*i-i*” but instead with “*ɿ*”. This “*ɿ*” would neither easily translate as “yes” nor as “no” but instead as “I am listening to you but I do not want to commit myself to any definite response”. This corresponds to the general trend observed among †Akhoe Hailom, namely that speakers are reluctant to use “yes/no” question (and answers for that matter) which force the interlocutor into a binary choice (see Hoymann, 2010). More generally we may conclude that these interjections question the assumption that perception and representation is primarily analytic and only secondarily holistic. Computer metaphors which have dominated research on language (and cognition) for considerable time suggest that the basic processes of perception and representation are binary just as the computer code is ultimately binary (in terms of flow of current versus no flow of current, “0” or “1”). Interjections support the doubt that has been shed on this computer metaphor. In the particular case outlined above they provide an intermediate option “*ɿ*”, a holistic default from which an “*ihi*” or “*i-i*” may emerge (or not) as more information becomes available and as the situation becomes clearer to the participants. Evidence from intonation and facial gestures supports the interpretation that we are not dealing with a binary “yes-no” but with a spectrum of utterances that shade into one another. The negative “*i-i*” usually goes with a falling prosody (at least in its stand-alone version) and with narrowing the two eye-brows while “*ihi*” goes with a rising voice and with eyebrows being raised. But “half-way” values (flat prosody, one eyebrow slightly raised) are also possible. Phenomenology has pointed out that many, if not most situations are holistically “undecided” and only become clarified as interaction proceeds (Schmitz, 2008: 116). In this vein we may say that interjections often work as qualifiers that alter an utterance in a way that allows for several options without immediately committing the speaker to take a definite and propositional, on the record decision on what he or she is confronted with. This feature by itself may partly explain why interjections are so common in discourse. They are popular with speakers who sense the benefit of uncertainty in interaction but not very popular with grammarians and language teachers to whom uncertainty is anathema and something that should be avoided if at all possible.

## 10. CONCLUSION

The †Akhoe Hailom do not have an interjection that would completely match the Japanese “*eeto*”, just as the rendering of one interjection into another language is very difficult, for reasons that I have laid out above. Translating interjections presupposes good knowledge of the situation in which they were uttered so that a rendering in another language is at least as difficult as translating poetry. However, Japanese “*eeto*” may be said to indicate an attitude that I have also found when encountering †Akhoe Hailom and when answering to their questions about why Europeans do things the way they do. †Akhoe Hailom are often curious to find out what others feel and think and anthropologists living with them are a welcome source of information (and entertainment) in that sense. At the same time †Akhoe Hailom are sceptical about what they hear and would often not want to take over ideas and practices blindly. We can often observe what appears to be “a healthy sceptical autonomy”. I am wondering whether Sugawara, and other Japanese colleagues, evidently have so much sympathy for the San way of life because they, too, share this healthy sceptical autonomy towards European ideas. Coming back to my point of departure in this contribution, I would even go as far as saying that the interjection “*eeto*” may serve as a root metaphor for the position of Japanese scholars towards ideas that they receive from Europe. In Sugawara’s case these would be ideas of European phenomenologists which he took on but not through a process of blind copying but with some hesitation (“...*eeto*...”) and with some reworking. He reworked key ideas from European thinkers through the perspective of a Japanese tradition of research and through the experience of working with San in Botswana. By doing that, he has not only contributed to phenomenological thinking, about embodied experience for instance, but he has created a genuinely new take on the matter. Much European phenomenology (and its North American counterpart) is vague and aloof, paradoxically disconnected from lived experience by an inaccessible language and with a shortage of concrete examples. Moreover, it is often centered on the individual subjects and not on social events. Sugawara’s brand of phenomenology is different, it is grounded in detailed observation and meticulous documentation of social relationships. It makes phenomenology attractive even to the sceptic and it often makes English-speaking colleagues go “wow”.

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