

Expressive syntax: exclamatives, complementizers and epistemic modality

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On the (in)compatibility of modal particles with the exclamative reading across Venetan dialects

Nicola Munaro

Ca' Foscari University of Venice

1. The puzzle

In Northern Venetan we can distinguish two classes of modal particles, namely particles deriving (cf. Pellegrini 1972) from the grammaticalization of adverbial elements, like *po* or *mo* in the non-canonical questions in (1a-b), or from the grammaticalization of pronouns, like *tì* in the non-canonical question in (1c):

- (1)a. Quando rive-lo *po*?!
'When will he arrive afterall?'
- b. Màgne-lo bastanza *mo*?!
'Does he eat enough?'
- c. Cossa farà-la *tì*?!
'What the hell is she doing?'

Hinterhölzl & Munaro (2015) analyze the syntactic and semantic properties of modal particles appearing in non-assertive speech-acts, and propose that this kind of particles in special questions function as evidential/epistemic markers interacting with the evaluative component.¹

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Quite interestingly, they notice that no such particle can appear in Northern Venetan in the clause final position of a *wh*-exclamative clause, as witnessed by (2) and (3):

(1) *Che bela machina che te à comprà (*po/*mo/*ti)!*

‘What a beautiful car you have bought!’

(1) *Quanti libri che i à ledést (*po/*mo/*ti)!*

‘How many books they have read!’

They attribute this incompatibility to a functional overlap between the semantics of a *wh*-exclamative clause and the interpretive contribution of the particle, which amounts to signalling that there is a gap between the speaker’s expectation and the actual state of affairs. In this work I intend to propose a slightly different account based on Hinterhölzl & Munaro (2021), the basic idea being that what triggers the (in)compatibility with certain types of particles is the inherently assertive nature of exclamatives, as opposed to non-canonical questions.

1. On some defining properties of exclamatives

Exclamatives have recently received a lot of attention in the literature that discusses sentence types and their proper characterization. An essential feature of the exclamative clause type consists in the fact that the speaker signals the whole propositional content, or a part of it (namely the preposed *wh*-constituent), as noteworthy or remarkable to some extent, in the sense that the domain of quantification is widened to include values not contemplated in the speaker’s initial expectations, thus inducing an emotionally salient effect of surprise.

While there is agreement that exclamatives form a separate sentence type, there is disagreement on whether they form a separate illocutionary type (and whether there is a special feature or operator that determines their clause type and (some of) their syntactic properties).

opinions, neither the European Union nor the European Commission can be considered responsible for them. In order to provide an adequate derivational account of the distribution of these particles and of their expressive meaning, they propose that their semantic impact requires the syntactic representation of separate evaluational and evidential phrases pertaining to speaker and hearer as well as the representation of a speech act operator.

In particular, Zanuttini & Portner (2003) argue against the presence of such an element and propose that the illocutionary force of exclamatives is derived indirectly and follows from two properties of exclamatives: (a) a *wh*-operator variable structure that introduces a domain of quantification that is subject to widening and (b) the presence of an abstract F (for factivity) in the CP domain. In other words, exclamatives are characterized by two fundamental semantic properties, namely *factivity* and *denotation (and widening) of a set of alternative propositions*.²

In the German non-canonical question in (4a) it must be true that John has invited someone and that the (type of) person that John invited in the utterance situation is beyond the range of expected types (widening with respect to a given norm or with respect to the speaker's expectation):

(1)a. Wen hAt Hans da wieder eingeladen?! (surprise-disapproval question)

‘Whom has John there again invited?!’

b. Wen Hans dA wieder eingeladen hat! (*wh*-exclamative)

‘Whom John there again invited has!’

Notice at this point that the same pragmatic considerations apply to *wh*-exclamatives, as illustrated in (4b). Also in the context of (4b), it must be true that John invited someone and that the (type of) person that he invited is beyond the range of the expected types.

However, the illocutionary force in (4a) and (4b) is different and seems to be connected with the presence/absence of Verb Second. While (4a) in the presence of Verb Second is used to exhort an explanation from the hearer for the surprising state of affairs, (4b) is used to express the speaker's surprise on a state of affairs that is evident to both speaker and hearer. In other words, (4a) has the force of a question, while (4b) has a force that is more akin to an assertion (cf. Rett 2011).

As argued by Hinterhölzl & Munaro (2021), non-canonical *wh*-questions and *wh*-exclamatives involve the expression of surprise about an unexpected state of affairs; however, they exhibit a difference in illocutionary force: while non-canonical questions constitute directive speech

²For instance, in (1), the factive morpheme is taken to introduce the presupposition that the proposition that John eats something is true. Moreover, the *wh*-phrase is taken to introduce a domain of quantification over the set of the things that John eats that is subject to widening to the domain of things that one would not expect John to eat:

(i) What (strange) things John eats!

In a similar vein, surprise/disapproval questions introduce a factive presupposition and a domain of quantification that is arguably subject to widening.

acts which request the hearer to provide an explanation for the unexpected state of affairs, *wh*-exclamatives are more akin to assertions, since they are used to underline the speaker's surprise about the difference between the expected state of affairs and the actual one.

1. Some differences between exclamatives vs non-canonical questions in Italian

These interpretive differences between special questions and exclamatives are syntactically codified by the presence/absence of Verb Second in German and by a difference in the final landing site of the *wh*-element in standard questions, non-canonical questions and *wh*-exclamatives in standard Italian. For example, the complementizer *che* 'that', which can optionally follow the *wh*-constituent in a *wh*-exclamative clause, like in (5a), cannot appear in the corresponding interrogative clause, not even in non-canonical ones, as witnessed by (5b-c):³

- (5) a. A quante persone (che) l'hai raccontato!
'To how many people you told it!'
- b. A quante persone (*che) l'hai raccontato?!
'To how many people did you tell it?!'
- c. A quante persone (*che) l'hai raccontato?
'To how many people did you tell it?'

The data in (5) clearly suggest that in Italian the *wh*-operator occupies a different structural position in exclamatives and in non-canonical interrogatives. This conclusion is strengthened by the fact that, as first observed by Benincà (2001), in an exclamative clause the *wh*-phrase can freely appear at the left of a topicalized constituent:⁴

³Notice that the optional realization of the complementizer in *wh*-exclamatives in Italian can be taken as evidence for the hypothesis that in German the final position of the inflected verb in the same context may be determined by the presence of an abstract (i.e. phonetically unrealized) complementizer, which prevents verb raising to the C° head, excluding the V2 configuration.

⁴Summing up, with respect to the presence of the complementizer *che*, non-canonical interrogatives behave like standard interrogatives, as they do not tolerate the presence of the complementizer; as for the position of the *wh*-phrase with respect to a left-dislocated constituent they behave instead like exclamatives, since the topicalized item follows generally the *wh*-phrase. This peculiar syntactic behaviour seems to suggest that non-canonical interrogatives have an intermediate status between canonical interrogatives and exclamatives; this leads to the hypothesis that the *wh*-phrase in non-canonical interrogatives could occupy a left-peripheral structural position higher than the one occupied in canonical interrogatives but lower than the one occupied in exclamatives.

(6) Che bel libro, a Gianni, che (gli) hanno regalato!

‘What a nice book they donated to John!’

Interestingly, some ‘expressive’ lexical elements like *cavolo/diavolo/cazzo* can modify the *wh*-phrase only in surprise/disapproval questions, like in (7b), and questions with unidentified variable, like in (8b), preferably when these are introduced by the particle *ma*, but crucially not in the corresponding canonical question (see examples in (7a) and (8a)) and only marginally in the corresponding exclamative clause (see examples in (7c) and (8c)):

(7) a. Che [*cavolo/*diavolo/*cazzo di] libro hai comprato?

‘What X of book have you bought?’

b. Ma che [cavolo/diavolo/cazzo di] libro hai comprato?!

‘But what X of book have you bought?!’

c. Che [??cavolo/??diavolo/??cazzo di] libro che hai comprato!

‘What X of book you have bought!’

(8) a. Dove [*cavolo/*diavolo/*cazzo] hai messo le chiavi?

‘Where X did you put the keys?’

b. Ma dove [cavolo/diavolo/cazzo] hai messo le chiavi?!

‘But where X did you put the keys?!’

c. (Guarda) dove [??cavolo/??diavolo/??cazzo] hai messo le chiavi!

(Look) where X you put the keys!’

This distributional restriction can be interpreted as indicating that a subset of non-canonical questions (and in particular surprise/disapproval questions and questions with unidentified variable) are endowed with an illocutionary force which is different both from the one of information-seeking questions, where the speaker elicits an informative answer from the addressee, and from the one of

wh-exclamatives, where the speaker introduces a conventional scalar implicature to the effect that the denoted proposition lies at the extreme end of some contextually given scale.⁵

1. Verbal particles

Besides particles of adverbial and pronominal origin exemplified in (1) above, some Venetan dialects also feature verb-based particles which seem to be admitted in exclamative contexts.

1.

1.1. *Ciò*

The particle *ciò* derives from (the grammaticalization of) the 2nd singular imperative form of the verb *tor* 'take', as discussed by Chinellato and Penello (2008). Unlike the particles mentioned above, *ciò* is perfectly compatible both with an interrogative and with an exclamative reading:

- (9) a. Ti ga capìo, *ciò*?
'Hey you, did you get what I told you?'
b. Che casa granda che la se ga comprà, *ciò*!
'She bought herself a really big house!'

My hunch is that the compatibility of *ciò* with the exclamative reading is due precisely to its verbal origin, which makes it compatible with the factive/assertive component of the exclamative semantics. This hypothesis receives empirical support from the West-flemish verb-based particles studied in detail by Haegeman (2014), who analyzes *zé* 'look', *wè* 'know' and *nè* 'take' as heads of distinct left-peripheral Speech Act projections occurring above ForceP.

Interestingly, these particles all derive from predicates that entail/presuppose the propositional content of the clause in which they appear. We can surmise that particles of verbal origin, which were originally independent main predicates selecting an embedded clause, are

⁵In their view these types of non-canonical interrogatives share the semantic property that Zanuttini & Portner (2003) call 'widening', that is closely related to Obenauer's (1994) description of the meaning of exclamatives, according to which the *wh*-phrase binds a variable for which an appropriate value cannot be found in the contextually given domain. However, the data in (7) and (8) suggest that, while exclamatives imply a more neutral and epistemically determined subjective evaluation of the speaker, the widening activated in non-canonical questions is evaluated subjectively and emotionally by the speaker, such that he is entitled to express his personal assessment by qualifying the referent of the *wh*-phrase through the explicit use of 'expressive' lexical means.

subsequently reanalyzed as uninflected lexical items merged in a left-peripheral functional position. Indeed, *ciò* must be located very high in the clausal spine, as witnessed by the fact that it must precede vocative expressions (cf. Haegeman & Hill 2014):

- (10) a. *Ciò* Maria, tenta come che te parli!
b. *Maria, *ciò*, tenta come che te parli!
‘Maria, pay attention on what you say!’

Interestingly, clause-initial *ciò* can co-occur with the complementizer *che*, and if the complementizer is present nothing can intrude between *ciò* and *che*:

- (11) a. *Ciò* (*Maria) che ghe vago!
‘Maria, I will surely go there!’
b. *Ciò!* Vago via!
‘Ehi listen! I am leaving!’

In the dialects where it can occur with or without a complementizer, the two variants differ in the pragmatic import and in the prosodic contour. The example in (11a) is used pragmatically to reply to a previous utterance, conveying a sense of surprise by the speaker at the question of the interlocutor, while in (11b) *ciò* has the pragmatic function of drawing the attention of the interlocutor to what is being said.

Following Haegeman & Hill (2013), I postulate a recursive SpeechAct layer, articulated in a higher SpeechAct^{2°} encoding the setting up of the discourse layer (with an ‘attention seeking’ attitude of the speaker), and a lower SpeechAct^{1°} (with a ‘bonding’ function), encoding the consolidation of the discourse relation and anchoring the associated clause to the discourse.

The crossdialectal distribution of *ciò* in Venetan strongly suggests a derivational cline according to which this particle was originally an inflected verb yielding independent assertions, which was first reanalyzed as a left-peripheral head (arguably SpeechAct^{1°}) of the originally embedded clause, still introduced by the complementizer, like in (11a). In examples like (11a) *ciò* is still syntactically and prosodically integrated with the associated clause, while in (11b) it displays

the distinctive properties of a non-integrated interjection (lexicalizing the higher SpeechAct2° head), as witnessed by the strong prosodic break intervening between *ciò* and the rest of the clause.

In some varieties, besides appearing in isolation, *ciò* can be associated to an exclamative clause either in sentence initial position, like in (12b), or in sentence final position, like in (12c), but is incompatible with the complementizer *che*, as witnessed by the following examples from the dialect of Badia Polesine (Alto Polesano):

- (12) a. **Ciò* che Marco el ga passà l'esame!
 ‘Marco did pass the exam indeed!’
- b. *Ciò!* Marco el ga passà l'esame!
 ‘Surprisingly, Marco has passed the exam!’
- c. Marco el ga passà l'esame! *Ciò!*
 ‘Marco has passed the exam,
 surprisingly!’

Interestingly, as shown by the ungrammaticality of (12a), in this variety *ciò* cannot be followed by the complementizer *che*, which means, under the present approach, that it does not undergo a process of prosodic and structural integration with the co-occurring clause; this restriction can be explained by the hypothesis that in this variety the particle is generated as lexicalization of a higher SpeechAct2° head, from where it can attract the associated clause to its specifier, as in (13b):

- (1)a. [SpeechAct2P [SA° *Ciò!*_x] [SpeechAct1P [EvalSP [ForceP [FinP Marco el ga passà l'esame!]]]]]
- b. [SpeechAct2P [FinP Marco el ga passà l'esame!]_x [SA° *Ciò!*] [SpeechAct1P [EvalSP [ForceP t_x]]]]]

The fact that in some Venetan dialects *ciò* can also occur in final position is particularly enlightening: the distributional properties of this particle in the Venetan region reveals that the central Venetan area also allows for clause-final *ciò*, while the dialects located at the periphery exclude clause-final *ciò* (cf. Chinellato and Penello 2008). This clearly suggests that there is a

diachronic change in progress and that the particle was originally only clause-initial and has become clause-final only in some varieties (as discussed in Del Gobbo, Munaro & Poletto 2015).

As anticipated above, the non-integrated version of *ciò* is also attested with *wh*-exclamatives, like in the following examples from central Venetan:

- (1)a. *Ciò!* Che casa granda che la se ga comprà! b.
Che casa granda che la se ga comprà, *ciò!*

‘She bought herself a really big house!’

In these contexts *ciò* is presumably reanalyzed by the speakers as a discourse-related head of the left periphery (arguably the higher SpeechAct^{2°} head), as represented in (15a); finally it has become in the central Veneto area an attractor for the associated clause, tolerating (or even forcing) the clause-final position, like in (14b), represented as in (15b):

- (15) a. [SpeechActP [SA° *Ciò!*] [ForceP Che casa granda che la se ga comprà]]
b. [SpeechActP [ForceP Che casa granda che la se ga comprà]_x [SA° *ciò!*] t_x]

1.

1.1.(V)ara/A

A second particle of verbal origin attested in Central and Southern Venetan is *a*, deriving from a reduction of (v)ara, the 2nd person singular form of the imperative of the verb ‘look’.

A is fully compatible with *wh*-exclamative clauses, as witnessed by the following examples from the dialect of Badia Polesine:

- (16) a. (V)ara/A quanti libri che i ga leto i to amighi!
‘Look how many books your friends read!’
b. (V)ara/A che casa grande che’l se ga comprà Carlo!
‘Look what a big house Carlo bought!’

Interestingly, in this dialect the reduced form *a*, unlike the full form (*v*)*ara*, cannot be followed by the complementizer *se* (exactly like *ciò* is incompatible with *che* in this variety) which witnesses an ongoing grammaticalization process:

- (17) a. (*v*)*ara* se Marco no'l ga passà l'esame!
b. **A* se Marco no'l ga passà l'esame!
c. **Ciò* che Marco el ga passà l'esame!
'Marco did pass the exam indeed!'

However, *a* is compatible with the complementizer *che*, and must be strictly adjacent to it, with the vocative appearing obligatorily at the outset of the clause:

- (18) a. Maria, (*v*)*ara* che desso vao via!
b. Maria, *a* che desso vao via!
'Maria, I am going away!'

- (19) a. (*v*)*ara*, Maria, che desso vao via!
b. **A*, Maria, che desso vao via!
'Maria, I'm going away!'

The same ordering restriction is attested in Venetian, as witnessed by (20):

- (20) a. *Ara* (bambin) che te caschi!
b. *A* (*bambin) che te caschi!
'Pay attention, (darling), you are about to fall down!'

Moreover, as observed by Del Gobbo, Munaro & Poletto (2015), in Venetian both *a* and *ara* require a complementizer, as shown in (21); notice also that, while *ara* can be used as a warning with respect to an action which is happening at the moment of utterance or in the future, *a* can only refer to a contingent situation, as exemplified in (22):

- (21) a. *Ara* *(che) te caschi!
b. *A* *(che) che te caschi!
'Pay attention, you are about to fall down!'
- (22) a. *Ara* che te caschi, se te va là sora!
b. **A* che che te caschi, se te va là sora!
'Pay attention, you will fall down, if you go up there!'

These data suggest that the reduced form *a* displays a greater degree of grammaticalization than *ara*; moreover, as proposed by Del Gobbo, Munaro & Poletto (2015), they also show that *ciò* has reached a further stage of the grammaticalization process than *a*, as *ciò* does not necessarily require a complementizer and it can also appear in clause-final position in some varieties.

5. Conclusions

Special questions are directive speech acts involving a subjective evaluation of the state of affairs by the speaker and - as directives - require an explanation of the state of affairs described by the proposition on part of the hearer. On the other hand, exclamatives are assertive speech acts involving a subjective evaluation of the actual state of affairs with respect to the state of affairs expected by the speaker on a standard scale; since the common ground of the hearer is not involved, no action on the part of the hearer is required, as witnessed by the fact that a verbal reply to an exclamative clause is generally awkward.⁶

Precisely for this reason *wh*-exclamatives are only compatible with particles of verbal origin deriving from predicates (like 'take', 'look' or 'see') that presuppose the propositional content of the clause in which they appear. Crosslinguistic evidence from other Romance varieties is provided by Sánchez López (2017) and Villalba (2024).

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⁶So *wh*-exclamatives focus on the unexpected high degree of the difference between the actual and the expected state of affairs. Exclamatives, like declaratives, may be called assertions since the actual state of affairs constitutes unexpected, hence new information with respect to the speaker's inner expectation. The additional component of expression of surprise about the degree of difference between the actual and the expected situation on part of the speaker is asserted and may thus be subject for discussion.

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