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ABSTRACT

This paper examines semantic constraints governing the occurrence of interjections with various other types of grammatical phenomena. Four interjections, "oh," "ah," "say," and "well," which typically occur embedded in sentences, are discussed in terms of their semantic properties and possible contexts. It is concluded that: interjections do not occur inside sentences unless there is a plausible semantic alternative to the element which follows them and which they refer to; "oh" and "well" can be used if the speaker is simply trying to think of alternatives, but that "say" and "ah" have more stringent conditions attached; and that there are numerous grammatical phenomena with which any or all of these interjections are incompatible. These phenomena include: certain types of pronouns, idioms, final sentential adverbs, negative polarity items, presupposition-suspending "if" clauses, picture noun clauses, preposed adverbials, and topicalized words. It is further concluded that the behavior of interjections can reflect or reveal unusual and poorly understood properties of phenomena such as picture noun clauses and preposed adverbials. (Author/AM)

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A STUDY IN THE RELATIONSHIPS OF OH, AH, SAY, AND WELL
TO NUMEROUS GRAMMATICAL PHENOMENA

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Interjections have typically been regarded as words which are used simply to express emotion. It has been assumed that they can be inserted more or less randomly into any sentence, and that they do not bear grammatical relationships to other phenomena in language. In James (1972) and (1973), I have presented evidence that there are in fact syntactic constraints on the occurrence of interjections. In this paper, I will examine semantic constraints governing the occurrence of interjections with various other types of grammatical phenomena. I will discuss four interjections which typically occur embedded inside sentences: oh, ah, say, and well. It will be shown that these do not occur in sentences when there is no semantic alternative to the elements which follow them, and which they "refer to", in a sense which I will make clear shortly. The definition of a "possible alternative" is not quite the same for all four interjections. With certain types of grammatical constructions, it is typically the case that there is a lack of possible alternatives to the elements in the construction, ^{-in some cases a total lack, in other cases a lack in at least one sense-} thus, interjections are not normally found, ^{either} preceding ^{of all} such constructions, or ~~perhaps~~ some interjections are found but not others. In the case of some types of grammatical phenomena, it is not clear that there is a lack of alternatives involved, but nevertheless interjections do not naturally occur with them. In these cases, the behavior of interjections reveals some interesting, and rather mysterious, characteristics of the phenomena concerned.

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Certain points about the words oh, ah, say, and well which have been discussed in my earlier papers need to be reiterated here. First, there seem to be two distinct oh's, which I refer to as oh₁ and oh₂. Oh₁ is that use of oh that one finds in sentences such as:

(1) Oh, the house is burning down!

It indicates that the speaker has just found out or realized something, and may also serve as a vehicle for intonation indicating surprise or some other emotion. The other oh, oh₂, is found in sentences such as this:

(2) I bought, oh, a book.

This use of oh indicates that the speaker is choosing or selecting something to say, out of several possible alternatives. Here, it could be the case that the speaker bought several things, and that he is choosing just one, "a book", to mention; or it could be that this is the most convenient description he can think of for what he bought, out of several possible descriptions. Thus, oh₁ and oh₂ are semantically quite different. Also, whereas oh₁ is normally found by itself or at the beginning of sentences, oh₂ is normally found inside sentences. Oh₁ is quite similar to ah; compare (1) (which I will repeat) with (3):

(1) Oh, the house is burning down!

(3) Ah, the house is burning down!

Ah, like oh₁, indicates that the speaker has just found out or realized something; but ah in addition seems to always indicate either that the speaker is pleased or that he thinks the thing he has just found out is significant in some way. Thus, (3), I think, would always be interpreted with connotations of this sort. Since oh₁ and ah behave in a very similar way with regard to the facts to be discussed in this paper, I will leave oh₁ out of the discussion altogether.

Therefore, when I refer to oh I shall mean oh_2 , that usage of oh which indicates that the speaker is choosing one out of several possible alternatives.

The word say, like oh, also has two quite different types of use. In one of them, which I call the say₁ use, say appears only at the beginning of sentences and, like oh₁, indicates that the speaker has just found out or noticed something; for example,

(4) Say, it's raining!

I will not discuss this use of say. The other use, which I call say₂, is found primarily embedded inside sentences, and can be paraphrased, depending on context and certain other semantic factors, as either "for example" or "let's imagine"; e.g., (5) and (6):

(5) Fred is thinking of buying, say, some books (say is paraphraseable as "for example" here)

(6) The witch turned into, say, a toad (say is paraphraseable as "let's imagine" here).

When I refer to say, then, I shall mean this sentence-internal say₂ use, with either of these two readings.

The meaning of the interjection well has been discussed by Robin Lakoff (1970). Basically, well seems to indicate that not all of the information which the hearer might need, given the situation, is present in what the speaker is saying. For example, one might say

(7) I bought, well, peaches

when in fact the fruit that one bought was not exactly peaches but some closely related fruit; in saying "well" the speaker is hesitating to think of exactly what to say, and is indicating that his description is going to be an approximate one, that there is more that could be said.

One thing which oh₂, say₂, and well, and sentence internal ah, all have in common is that when one says these words, one is stopping to think of what to say next. With oh, one is choosing one out of several alternatives to mention. With say₂, one is choosing something as an example. With well, one is stopping to think of what would be the best or most appropriate thing to say next. And when ah is used sentence internally, it usually indicates that one has just managed to remember something (which again involves thinking about which of several possible alternatives is the correct one). Thus, any of these words could be used in this sentence:

(8) Igor said he would bring you, $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{oh,} \\ \text{well,} \\ \text{say,} \\ \text{--ah!} \end{array} \right\} \text{some French hens}$

In each case, in saying the interjection, the speaker has stopped to think about what exactly to say next; either he has chosen to mention "some French hens" rather than some other thing or things, or he has chosen the phrase "some French hens" as the best description he can think of the thing which he wishes to mention. (The last interpretation is possible for oh and well only.) We can say that in each case the interjection "refers to" the phrase "some French hens", because it is that phrase, or what is to fill that slot, which the speaker is stopping to think about in saying the interjection. Notice in particular that the use of an interjection such as these implies that there are possible alternatives which the speaker is choosing from. It follows from this that an interjection is odd if it occurs before, and refers to, some word or phrase to which there is no plausible alternative that one can imagine. For example, take a sentence such as (9).

(9) I will go skating, and so will my husband.

Suppose one positioned an interjection before the second will, and had it refer to "will". This would be anomalous, because there is no alternative to "will";

given that there is a preceding pronoun so, the modal must be the same as that which occurs in the first half of the sentence; thus, (10) is quite peculiar with any interjection:

(10) I will go skating, and so, $\left. \begin{array}{l} *oh, \\ *well, \\ *say, \\ *--ah! \end{array} \right\} \underline{\text{will}}, my husband.$

For the same reason, interjections are very strange before pronouns in cases in which only one possible pronoun could occur in that particular position. This is normally the case with sentence and verb phrase pronominalization. For example:

(11) *Aida doubts that Dorothea is really her rival, but Kathy doesn't doubt, say, it

(12) *Jack flies planes carefully, but I do, oh, so, with reckless abandon

(13) *Marjorie wants to go to Julie's birthday party, and--ah, so! does Aida

In all of these cases, there is no possible alternative to the pronoun which occurs; only that pronoun can occur there, and therefore to hesitate and use an interjection before saying the pronoun is odd.

Likewise, interjections are odd inside idioms; for example, (14) and (15):

(14) *I wonder who, well, the hell, will accept Martha's invitation

(15) *Who did Jane take up, say, with?

Since "who the hell" and "take up with" are fixed idioms, there is no possible alternative to "the hell" in (14) or "with" in (15).

Let's now turn to some more complicated cases. One such case has to do with final sentential adverbs, such as certainly, admittedly, and evidently. Say and ah are unacceptable preceding these, and oh and well are questionable; for example:

(16) I lied to him about the money $\left. \begin{array}{l} ?oh, \\ ??well, \\ *say, \\ *--ah! \end{array} \right\} \text{certainly}$

(17) It's faithful likeness, $\left. \begin{array}{l} oh, \\ ??well, \\ *say, \\ *--ah! \end{array} \right\} \text{admittedly}$

(19) The election was rigged, $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{oh,} \\ \text{well,} \\ \text{*say,} \\ \text{?--ah!} \end{array} \right\}$ unquestionably
undeniably

It seems to be more reasonable to stop to choose an adverb, or even to remember that that is the adverb one wants, if it contains a negative than if it does not. Perhaps what is really going on is that one is choosing to say that the negation is absolute rather than conditional or absent; thus, there is a more clear choice involved than is the case with the positive adverbs.

Another situation in which oh and well seem acceptable or relatively so but say and ah do not has to do with negative polarity items. Take, for example, the following sentences:

(20) Was Rhonda surprised, you ask? She didn't, $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{oh,} \\ \text{?well,} \\ \text{*say,} \\ \text{*--ah!} \end{array} \right\}$ bat an eye

(21) They haven't eaten, $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{oh,} \\ \text{?well,} \\ \text{*say,} \\ \text{*--ah!} \end{array} \right\}$ at all

Oh and well here would, I think, imply that the speaker was hesitating to think of the best way of phrasing what he had to say. Say and ah cannot be used in this way, however, as we have seen. And clearly, in the case of say, one could not very well interpret, for example, at all in (21) as a specific example which the speaker has chosen over some other distinctly different possible example, such as yet. Nor, in the case of ah, would it be plausible to suppose that the speaker would forget in mid-sentence that what he wanted to say was "at all". Therefore, say and ah are both unacceptable in these sentences. If the negative polarity item is longer and there is a possibility of substantially different alternatives within it, however, say and ah are acceptable, as in these sentences:

(22) Did John, say, do as much as take out the garbage?

(23) Sam hasn't given me a present--ah! in years.

In (22), the speaker could be choosing "take out the garbage" over, for example,

(19) The election was rigged, $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{oh,} \\ \text{well,} \\ \text{*say,} \\ \text{?--ah!} \end{array} \right\}$ unquestionably
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(22) Did John, say, do as much as take out the garbage?

(23) Sam hasn't given me a present--ah! in years.

In (22), the speaker could be choosing "take out the garbage" over, for example,

"water the plants"; in (23), he could be choosing "years" over "months". These are substantially different alternatives to the phrases actually used; therefore, say and ah are acceptable.

The behavior of interjections with if-clauses is also interesting. Interjections are generally acceptable before ordinary if-clauses; for example,

(24) John doesn't beat his wife, $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{oh,} \\ \text{well,} \\ \text{say,} \\ \text{--ah!} \end{array} \right\}$ if she makes a good dinner

Here, any of the interjections is acceptable because there are plausible alternative conditions under which John might not beat his wife. Compare (25), however, which contains an if-clause which suspends a presupposition, to use Horn's terminology, that is, the presupposition that John used to beat his wife:

(25) John doesn't beat his wife anymore, $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{oh,} \\ \text{?well,} \\ \text{*say,} \\ \text{*--ah!} \end{array} \right\}$ if he ever did

Here, the speaker might be hesitating in order to decide how to best phrase his if-clause, or whether to say it at all (and thus oh and well are reasonably possible here); but he could hardly be choosing it over other substantially different alternative if-clauses, since it is specifically suspending a certain presupposition. Thus say and ah are not possible. The length of the presupposition-suspending if-clause and the positioning of the interjection are also quite significant, as is shown in the following sentences:

(26) I have only three friends, $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{oh,} \\ \text{?well,} \\ \text{*say,} \\ \text{*--ah!} \end{array} \right\}$ if that

(27) I have only three friends, if, $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{*oh,} \\ \text{*well,} \\ \text{*say,} \\ \text{*--ah!} \end{array} \right\}$ that

(28) I have only three friends, if, $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{oh,} \\ \text{well,} \\ \text{??say,} \\ \text{*--ah!} \end{array} \right\}$ I even have that many

In (27), it is hard to imagine what alternative there could be to the word "that"; therefore, any interjection is odd. In (28), it is more clearly the case that one might have phrased the if-clause differently, perhaps significantly differently; thus, oh and well are reasonable, and even say does not seem as bad as it does in (26) and (27).

Sometimes the presence of an interjection will render a sentence which would otherwise be ^{unambiguous.} ambiguous. For example, sentence (29):

(29) Jane is pretty, if not beautiful

This sentence is ambiguous, in that the if-clause could be paraphrased either as "and maybe she's even beautiful" or as "even if she's not beautiful". Compare (30):

(30) Jane is pretty, if, $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{oh,} \\ \text{well,} \\ \text{*say,} \\ \text{*--ah!} \end{array} \right\}$ not beautiful

I think the preferred reading for (30) with oh or well would be the "even if she's not beautiful" reading. This is, I think, because oh and well indicate that the speaker is stopping to think about the unit "not beautiful"--to think about how to say it. This would encourage one to interpret the clause as "even if she's not beautiful" since "not beautiful" is more clearly one constituent in that reading, in comparison with the other reading, "and maybe she's even beautiful", in which I believe the constituents are "if not" and "beautiful". (I have shown in James (1973) that interjections and hesitations always refer to constituents.)

Another, rather more complex case in which interjections are strange has to do with picture noun constructions. Compare, for example, (31) and (32).

(31) Sam is buying pictures of, $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{oh,} \\ \text{well,} \\ \text{say,} \\ \text{--ah!} \end{array} \right\}$ boats

(32) Sam is buying Anne's pictures of, $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{??oh,} \\ \text{??well,} \\ \text{*say} \\ \text{*--ah!} \end{array} \right\}$ boats

In sentence (31), the word oh would probably indicate that the speaker was stopping to pick out one thing which Sam was buying pictures of. Insofar as oh could be used in (32), however, it would indicate that the speaker was stopping to think of the best way to describe what Anne's pictures portray; it could not mean he was stopping to pick out one thing which Sam was buying Anne's pictures of. This is undoubtedly related to the fact that this paraphrase is in itself ungrammatical, and this in turn has to do with the fact that the construction is an island. Oh and well are both acceptable in (32), then, only insofar as they can be used in stopping to think of how to best describe what Anne's pictures portray; that is, if the scope of what they describe, so to speak, is entirely within the island, and does not stray outside it.¹

As for say, in (31) it means something like "let's imagine it's boats that Sam is buying pictures of". In (32), the interpretation "let's imagine it's boats that Sam is buying Anne's pictures of" is not allowable; and since say cannot have any other reading which would be parallel to that of oh and well, it is anomalous. In the case of ah, in (32) it is presupposed that one knows what Anne's pictures portray; therefore, it is odd to suddenly forget in mid-sentence, and then remember, marking this with an ah. Ah is, for this reason, odd in any context in which what it refers to is presupposed. This makes ah anomalous in most islands, although the other interjections can, in general, occur in other types of islands (provided that in some sense the

scope of what they describe, as mentioned ^{above,} ~~a moment ago,~~ lies entirely within the island). Take, for example, (33), which contains a complex noun phrase:

- (33) Jane's report that Bill might leave, $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{oh,} \\ \text{well,} \\ \text{say,} \\ \text{*--ah!} \end{array} \right\}$ by Wednesday won't please Ralph

It is presupposed that one knows what Jane's report is; thus, ah is strange. The other interjections are acceptable if they indicate either that the speaker is stopping to rephrase or encapsulate what Jane's report said (in the cases of oh and well) or if they echo what Jane's report states, that is if Jane's report contains the word oh, well, or say, or some such phrase as for example. (This last interpretation would be possible for oh and well, and obligatory for say.)

Another area in which interjections behave in interesting and unpredictable ways has to do with preposed adverbials. (I have noted this before in my 1972 paper.) Interjections are acceptable after preposed place and time adverbials; for example,

- (34) In 1979, $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{oh,} \\ \text{well,} \\ \text{say,} \\ \text{--ah!} \end{array} \right\}$ men will reach Mars

- (35) On that spot, $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{oh,} \\ \text{well,} \\ \text{say,} \\ \text{--ah!} \end{array} \right\}$ a famous President once made a speech

but they are odd after preposed manner, reason, and instrument adverbials; for example,

- (36) Quietly, $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{*oh,} \\ \text{*well,} \\ \text{*say,} \\ \text{*--ah!} \end{array} \right\}$ Jack left

- (37) For some reason, $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{*oh,} \\ \text{??well,} \\ \text{*say,} \\ \text{*--ah!} \end{array} \right\}$ Frances wanted the mushrooms

(38) With a frying pan $\left. \begin{array}{l} *oh, \\ ??well, \\ *say, \\ *--ah! \end{array} \right\}$ Mary hit Stan

However, although (38) is strange with any interjection, (39) is fine:

(39) With a frying pan, $\left. \begin{array}{l} oh, \\ well, \\ say, \\ --ah! \end{array} \right\}$ you can cook an omelette

One might note in connection with these sentences that one can quite naturally say "I hereby select for mention one of several events which will happen in 1979", or "one of several events which happened on that spot"; but it seems somehow less natural to say "I hereby select one of several events which happened quietly" or "one of several events which happened for some reason" or "One of several events which happened with a frying pan". However, it is quite natural to select for mention one of several things which one can do with a frying pan. Essentially, in using these interjections, selecting something for mention is what one is doing; therefore, I think we may assume that sentences (36) through (38) are odd for the same reason that their paraphrases which I have given are odd; and that (34), (35), and (39) are normal for the same reason that their paraphrases are normal. We can then conclude from looking at the behavior of interjections and at sentences which paraphrase what they do that the semantic relationship between the adverbial and the rest of the sentence is not quite the same in the cases of manner, reason, and instrument adverbials in the cases of place and time adverbials.

One last area which I will mention in which interjections tend to be odd, is in sentences in which Topicalization has applied. For example, sentence (40)

(40) Madrid, $\left. \begin{array}{l} ?oh, \\ ??well, \\ ??say, \\ *--ah! \end{array} \right\}$ Roger's visiting

seems generally less acceptable than (41), in which a pronominal copy of the noun phrase has been left behind:

(41) Madrid, $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{oh,} \\ \text{well,} \\ \text{say,} \\ \text{--ah!} \end{array} \right\}$ Roger's visiting there

Somehow, in selecting one thing for mention about Madrid, it is more acceptable to come up with a whole sentence as in (41) than with a sentence fragment as in (40). In the Topicalization cases, however, if the sentence following the interjection is rather long, and also if the moved element has been moved from the middle rather than from the end of the sentence, an interjection is usually acceptable, as in (42):

(42) That sweater, $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{oh,} \\ \text{well,} \\ \text{say,} \\ \text{--ah!} \end{array} \right\}$ I got for Christmas in 1969

I do not know why these facts should be as they are.

Thus, we can conclude that interjections do not occur inside sentences unless there is a plausible semantic alternative to the element which follows then and which they refer to. We can conclude that oh and well can be used if the speaker is simply trying to think of the best way to phrase something, but that say and ah have more stringent conditions attached. And we can conclude that there are, at least in part for the reasons above, numerous grammatical phenomena with which these interjections, either all of them or only some, are incompatible. These include certain types of pronouns, idioms, final sentential adverbs, negative polarity items, presupposition-suspending if-clauses, picture noun clauses, preposed adverbials, topicalized words, and numerous other phenomena which it has not been possible to discuss here. Moreover, the behavior of interjections can reflect or reveal unusual and poorly-understood properties of phenomena; we have seen this in particular here in the cases of picture noun clauses and preposed adverbials. We can conclude, then, that behavior of

interjections with relation to other aspects of grammar is an interesting and valuable study.

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Footnote

1. I have not defined very explicitly what I mean by the "scope" of the interjection here. This is discussed in more detail in my dissertation.