
INTERJECTIONS, PHONETICS, AND THE BODY

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Abstract: Emotive interjektioner forbindes normalt med det talte sprog, men i denne artikel undersøges brugen af to interjektioner (*åh* og *puha*) som de skrives på to sygdoms- og mindesider på Facebook: “Fighting for Magnus (Miv)” og “Mindeside for Lærke Rønde Timm”. Interjektionerne betragtes som affektive udtryk fordi de afspejler nogle af de kropslige reaktioner der er afledt af at overvære og deltage i interaktionen på disse Facebooksider. I artiklen argumenteres der for at deltagernes kroppe (når de læser og skriver på Facebook eller ser dokumentaren om Magnus og efterfølgende skriver om det på Facebook) er i affekt, og at deltagerne skriver netop disse to interjektioner (*åh* og *puha*) som en reaktion på affekten. Ved hjælp af fonetiske forklaringer ses interjektioner som en kropsligt udløst og forankret reaktion.

1. Introduction

In this article, I will focus on the use of two interjections, *åh* ‘oh’ and *puha* ‘whew’ in written communication on Facebook. These belong to the kind Ameka (1992) calls the *primary class* (the secondary being words and expressions functioning as interjections rather than being interjections). Following Scherer (1994:179) these are defined as “affective expressions” or “affect vocalization”. The argument in the article is that interjections, although normally associated with the spoken language, find their way into the written language in certain situations as a way to reflect the body and bodily reactions. Normally, written interjections are associated with the more exaggerated and ostentatiously spirited examples of poetry and drama, *åh* ‘oh’ being one of the most frequently used interjections in those genres. But with the emergence of social media, written interjections have become a more common part of everyday written online interaction¹ (Hougaard 2013, 2017; Jørgensen 2018). I have investigated two Danish Facebook groups built around the illness and death of two young children in 2015: “Fighting for Magnus (Miv)” and “Commemorative site for Lærke Rønde Timm”. Amongst other remarkable

things to be observed in these groups, a word count showed a very high frequency of the interjections *åh* 'oh' and *puha* 'whew' (Hougaard 2017). Consequently, these interjections form the starting point of my investigation and discussion of interjections as affective signs.

2. The affected body creates affective signs

Social media plays a crucial part in the creation of new public gatherings around serious illness and death and thereby challenges existing ways of mourning by enabling the creation of intentional memorializing on grief-specific sites, e.g. cyber cemeteries, and on non-grief-specific sites, e.g. Facebook RIP pages (Klastrup 2015). The digital affect cultures of these gatherings can be investigated and understood through different kinds of language used by their participants (Stage & Hougaard 2018).

The main argument in the article is that the participants in the aforementioned cases write interjections as a way to deal with affective extraordinary experiences. Ethnographic data show that the almost real-time experience of a child's death – even though this was mediated by social media – affected the participants and provoked a reaction, leading them to transmit affects in various ways, e.g. in-the-heat-of-the-moment responses with tokens like hesitations dots, emojis and interjections (Stage & Hougaard 2018).

We often hear the expression “words fail me”, used as a way to explain our hesitation faced with the difficulty of expressing bodily or mental experiences that the mind is perhaps struggling to understand. We do not always know how to communicate a reflected verbal response to such experiences and perhaps a reflected response is not what is required. In situations of severe crisis, the involved people often turn to different kinds of “bodily actions” (Scherer 1994); for example, making sad facial muscle movements or bodily contractions, or they use some kind of “non-communicative expression” (Poggi 2009). To raise your voice (to use a term from the research on affect) is a way to eliminate and remove the affective stagnancy and despair from your body, to do “affective dumping” (Brennan 2004); the agent produces a physical perceivable stimulus to give vent to or to “obtain relief from his internal state” (Poggi 2009). But, when it comes to social media, this face-to-face action repertoire is not available, just like sympathetic sounds cannot be transmitted. In order to mark their presence, the participants in the groups in question either pressed a “social button” (Gerlitz & Helmond 2013), posted a picture, e.g. of a heart or a candle, or wrote a comment. A lot of these comments started with the interjections *åh* 'oh' or *puha* 'whew'. Instead of expressing their sympathy in a verbally articulate manner, some of the participants expressed their affects through interjections.

In the two cases, the participants followed the development for a long period of time, some, in fact, for months, as the ill body of the children weakened. In a likely scenario, this accumulated tension may have had a

physical effect on them, paralysing them physically in some sense. When the tension was suddenly released, as the child died, the tense and stressed body of each participant collapsed. While reading the sad report of the death of the child, the participants may have been holding their breath, both metaphorically and literally speaking, and when the child died, the air would have to leave their pressured body in order to let the tension go. They may have exhaled fiercely and intensely, and perhaps quickly. When a great volume of air leaves the body rapidly through a small aperture (the mouth), the result is (for physiological reasons) always audible. The greater the amount of air, and the greater its speed (owing to the fact that the air is constrained), the greater the noise. The noise made in these situations is often described as a sigh, or even as a moan, and can be written down as *åh* 'oh'. In the following I will elaborate this bodily oriented explanation of the high frequency of *åh* 'oh', and of *puha* 'whew' as well, in the data.

3. Some theoretical suggestions

Following this short description of the circumstances, I propose a two-sided theoretical approach to the cases with a view to broadening our understanding of interjections caused by the body. These two sides are respectively the "theory of affect", and a reinterpreted version of "phono-semantic analysis". My aim is not to schematise a universal theory covering all interjections, but on the one hand to deepen our comprehension of the practice of writing interjections in social media (specifically on commemorative sites on Facebook), and on the other hand to see certain primary interjections as a function of the body or bodily expressions, i.e. spontaneous transmissions of instinctive reactions into sounds and decipherable words or holophrastic expressions.

3.1 Emotional interjections

In line with what Goffman calls "response cries" (Goffman 1981:78f), I see interjections as a more or less impulsive and fierce reaction to something that happens at the moment that the interjection is articulated. Goffman's often cited description: "a natural overflowing, a flooding up of previously contained feelings, a bursting of normal restraints, a case of being caught off guard" (Goffman 1981:99) contains important explanations of primary interjections and emphasises their uncontrolled and impulsive nature. Some may understand the word "impulse" as a mental drive or instinctual urge. However, this should not be understood as something unintentional or involuntary. It seems likely that all sounds produced in interaction to some extent are socially motivated and therefore have a more or less reflective intention, like Goffman's notion that "most primary interjections are under our conscious control" (Wharton 2003). As Jefferson has shown (2004), even laughter (one of the most spontaneous and uncontrolled of human actions) can be repressed if repression serves a special purpose.

When we choose to express ourselves using audible elements, we want to make ourselves understood, to communicate, i.e. to establish a common understanding of the situation. We may not know exactly why we are using this particular distinctive sound or set of sounds, but we do not just emit sounds arbitrarily and haphazardly. Even though the aim of this paper is to underline the bodily element in our choice of interjections, it should also be acknowledged that interjections as well as other language elements are the result of interpersonal conventionalisation and cultural socialisation (Ameka 1992; Häuser 2011; Goddard 2014).

The approach to the data in this paper reflects the idea that language signs do not only transport meaning; signs are also used and produced by specific and affectively involved bodies, which are more or less present and visible in sign production (Knudsen & Stage 2015). According to Zizi Papacharissi, social media enable the creation of dynamic affective publics defined as “networked public formations that are mobilized and connected and disconnected through expressions of sentiment” (Papacharissi 2015:125).

When it comes to spoken interjections, the affected body as a trigger (Scherer 1994) has a remarkable influence on the choice of specific interjections in several ways. First of all, the affected body activates the need to communicate using “more or less instinctive, natural reactions” (Wharton 2003); secondly, the bodily tension makes certain sounds more obvious and apparent than others because they are bound to our exhalation as well as our non-exhalation when we hold our breath or let it go; furthermore “there is an intimate connection between interjections and gestures in general” (Ameka 1992).

Ulrike Stange points out (2016:29) that it is fruitful to make a distinction between interjections used emotively and interjections used emotionally. The term “emotive interjection” refers to interjections that express feelings in the emotional sense, i.e. “cognitively based feelings”. The emotional use is seen as a spontaneous, unintentional leakage or bursting and is therefore very different from the emotive use, which is strategic, persuasive, interactional and other-directed. The focus in this article is on the emotional – or affective – use of interjections, even though we, as Wharton warns, “should be careful not to overestimate the expressive, instinctive nature of these primary interjections” (Wharton 2003). This warning comes even more to its rights because of their written status in the data.

To some extent I take inspiration from the scattered thoughts of what might be placed under the umbrella of “phono-semantics” (Jakobson & Waugh 1979); but I want to examine the phonetics of particular interjections as a result of the interaction between the body, the nervous system, and the mouth and breath. The pivotal point of phono-semantics seems to be sound symbolism or sound meaning, building up an understanding of certain sounds bearing certain abstract meanings, as contrasted with the Saussurian

view that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary (unmotivated). While phono-semantics concentrates on the interrelatedness of form and content, my analysis of affective interjections has a stronger focus on the interrelatedness of form (sound) and body.

As I will show, the aural element plays a different role in interjections than in onomatopoeias, which are often seen as closely related to interjections (Brink 1998; Hansen & Heltoft 2011). Onomatopoeias are imitative wordings delivering a reported sound, e.g. imitating the sound of an incoming e-mail: *Sploing*. Interjections, on the other hand, contain a situated pointing and referring element; they are indexical (Wilkins 1992). While onomatopoeias are reverberations that shape or reshape the sound and thereby the experience and impression of what has happened (or may happen) as a stylised imitation, interjections are less stylised and more spontaneous articulations of what is happening emotionally right now, i.e. they are signifying feelings, sensations and states of mind. Being “exclamations” (Ameka 1992:103), the primary interjections (e.g. *ugh!*) express complex immediate emotions; they do not just describe feelings (e.g. *I’m disgusted*) or imitate the sound made by or associated with an act or an animal (e.g. *miaow*). Both word classes (onomatopoeias and interjections) though, belong to the expressive area of language use and intensify and vitalise the communication and the involvement.

It has always been a challenge to operationalise interjections as a word class (Ameka 1992; Wilkins 1992). In a way they are on the edge of language because they occasionally sound like something which is not decipherable as language, i.e. something which does not have a precise and conventionalised meaning, called “non-words” (Ameka 1992). In this field, perhaps we should operate with a continuum of expressions going from indistinct and slurred humming or other kinds of non-standardised noise-making to the definite and more or less consistent and conventionalised articulation of well-known and normatively accepted interjectional sounds, as suggested by Goddard (2014). This continuum encompasses a delimitation concerning sounds expressed non-deliberately, i.e. without some kind of intentionality. And it is precisely in this area that we find marginal cases of the interjections studied in this article. In this article we focus on their written use, meaning that the participants in the Facebook groups have adapted this affective outburst to fit an existing conventionalized form.

When it comes to spelling, the problems seem to grow, since conventional spelling is not always adequate to represent pronunciation and since only a few of the existing interjections are codified in the official dictionary of Danish standard orthography. Take for example the interjection that could be spelled *hmpf*. This interjection is probably thought of as an expression of doubt or contempt, but what is the difference between *hmpf* and *pf*, why does the spelling contain no vowels, and how is the former interjection actually articulated (with a silent *p* or not?). In this article the 12 different Danish

versions of the interjection *puha* ‘whew’) made me question my original thoughts about whether these interjections did the same affective job: *puh*, *puu*, *puha*, *pu ha*, *phuha*, *puhha*, *puhhhhh haaaa*, *pyh*, *pyyy*, *pyhaa*, *phyyha*, *pyyyyyyyh*. However, I do not seek to analyse the variants any further in this article. Rather, this calls for a study in its own right.

4. The interjections *åh* ‘oh’ and *puha* ‘whew’ and the body

In this section, the study of the use of *åh* ‘oh’ and *puha* ‘whew’ in two different Facebook groups is presented.

4.1 Data

The data consist of all the blog posts, comments, likes and pictures on the Danish commemoration sites of the two children (Lærke and Magnus), who both died of cancer in 2015. I have used the Danish web-based software called “Digital Footprint”, which has been developed at Aarhus University, to collect and quantitatively analyse the data – including counting the 100 words which are used most frequently. I have read all the blog posts and comments on Lærke’s site (249 blogposts and 2,675 comments), and I have read posts on selected dates (the date of death and the date of the documentary *Kampen for Magnus (The Fight for Magnus)* that was broadcast on national Danish television) from Magnus’s group (which contains a total of 5,224 blog posts and 44,777 comments). As regards the ethical issues, permission to examine the language used by the participants was granted by the mothers of both children. Still, the quotations have all been anonymised in order to secure discretion of those participants whose consent I have not asked for. There was a huge number of participants, and the Facebook group was open to the public. Even though both commemoration sites can be regarded as published material and the information given is neither private nor sensitive, I have chosen this procedure in order “to do no harm”, inspired by the AoIR ethical guidelines from 2012 (Markham & Buchanan 2012).

The data considered here reveals a frequent use of *åh* ‘oh’ and *puha* ‘whew’. These findings were surprising since the serious theme might have been expected to cause a more solemn and ritualised language use. For the sake of completeness, it should be added that the participants also wrote about their empathy and condolences in a less affective and more formal way (Stage & Hougaard 2018); but in this article the focus is on the affective perspective. Thus, the following phonetic analysis of the interjections concentrates on the interaction between the speech organs, the breath and the whole body. I claim that the phonological and physical circumstances are important to the participants when they choose these interjections, even though in a written context of communication.

4.2. Åh ‘oh’

On the day Magnus died, the interjection *åh* ‘oh’ was used 262 times (the 82nd most frequently used word of the day); and on the day Lærke died, the interjection *åh* ‘oh’ was used 27 times (the 36th most frequently used word of the day). In the written version of *åh* ‘oh’, the *h* is a marker of the prolongation of the vowel. In combination with the vowel *å* ‘o’, which is the deepest vowel demanding very little tension of the speech organs, the interjection *åh* ‘oh’ must be the sound made by the body when relaxing after literally holding your breath. Sometimes the vowel is followed by the grapheme *r* (*årh*), which is a graphic convention pointing to an intensified deep and dark quality of the vowel (in Danish this is called “*r*-påvirkning” (r influence)). *Åh* ‘oh’ is often combined with the negations *nej* ‘no’ (an attempted denial of the facts) and is typically placed at the beginning of the comment, i.e. turn-initial:

Example 1

M [redacted] Åh nej altså, hvor er det uretfærdigt og slet ikke til at bære. Rip ❤️

(Translation: Oh no how unfair it is and not at all to bear. Rip)

This position could be interpreted as a way of loosening the tied tongue, i.e. as an outburst of the detained body, and as in example 1 the interjection is often followed by interjectional use of negations and adverbs in combination with more elaborated expressions. Most of the *åh* ‘oh’s are written as a reaction to information which is difficult to cope with (diagnosis, rehospitalisation, death), and could naturally be seen as a potential echo of the followers’ own physical reactions. In their expressions of sympathy, the followers employ interjections to show and to characterise their affective involvement. And in some situations, an interjection is the only lexical vocalisation (see example 2) often accompanied by unhappy emojis intensifying the sadness and showing the reader that the interjection is an expression of sympathy and an attempt to deny the facts.

Example 2

C [redacted] Åhhh nej 😞😞😞😞❤️❤️❤️

(Translation: Ohhh no)

4.3. Puha ‘whew’

In some situations, the followers choose another interjection, namely *puha* ‘whew’. In Lærke’s case this interjection only occurs 15 times, but in Magnus’s case *puha* ‘whew’ is used 206 times, 198 of them on the day of the broadcast (the 92nd most frequently used word of the day). In contrast to *åh* ‘oh’, this interjection carries some kind of relief or detaching oneself from the situation.

The dictionaries explain this interjection as a surprised, dismayed or relieved reaction to something perceived as unpleasant or nasty. But why do the followers choose *puha* ‘whew’ in this precise context? The key to understanding this may lie in the fact that *puha* ‘whew’ is mostly used when the followers comment on something that is undoubtedly very difficult to endure, namely the aggravation of the illness or the final death sentence issued by one of the parents, or, in Magnus’s case, when they watched the intimate broadcast following Magnus right till the end – showed just three months after his death.

Like *åh* ‘oh’, *puha* ‘whew’ in the spoken version consists of an exhalation sound and a vowel or a complex set of vowel sounds, but there are minor differences: in Danish the interjection is more complex since it has two syllables and consequently two vowels: the *u* and the *a*. As for the consonants, the initial sound in Danish is a plosive in which the vocal tract is blocked via the lips so that all airflow is first stopped and then immediately afterwards released (Grønnum 2009:132). The initial sounds are hindered, which causes a breathy voicing, i.e. aspiration through exhalation. When someone says *puh*, the initial aspirated sound represents the exact moment when the closing of the mouth and the holding back of the breath is no longer maintained. The Danish *puha* could be seen as an even stronger release of the accumulated energy held back by the closed mouth.

In Lærke’s case the news that the illness is terminal and cannot be cured, and the news later on of her death, generate an increase in contributions; and in Magnus’s case the broadcast boosts the level of involvement (Stage & Hougaard 2018). In both cases the high number of comments and interjections could be read as situations with very strong affective potential. A likely scenario for the participants using the written version of *puha* ‘whew’ in the case of Magnus could be this: With bated breath, they have followed the development of the child’s illness (either in real time or via the broadcast three months later); and when this bodily anxiety and the intense and hopeful waiting time is suddenly replaced by a feeling of emptiness and hopeless despair – exaggerated by the dramatizing and powerful broadcast – the body of the followers collapse into an *åh* ‘oh’ or *puha* ‘whew’ – an articulation which is an almost palpable puff of air. And this they put down in writing as soon as possible, i.e. with the necessary delay due the process of writing.

Example 3

T [redacted] Puhha bare treaseren til jeres dokumentar trækker tårer frem
må huske kleenex på søndag

(Translation: Whew just the teaser to your documentary draws tears must remember the kleenex next Sunday)

Example 4

K [redacted] Puha der findes ingen ord føler med jer ♥
(Translation: Whew words fail me feel for you)

Of course, we do not know for sure whether this is actually happening to their bodies, but we can observe that the participatory investment and use of interjections are reinforced on specific dates. In example 3 the participant complements her use of *puhha* by describing her tears and thereby she exhibits a strong inner-focus, but the *puha* ‘whew’ is also used sympathetic: In example 4 the participant illuminates the impoverishment of the language when it comes to severe crises and the difficulties he has finding the right words of comfort, and in example 5 another participant uses a metaphor (*heavy steps*) to describe the funeral from the perspective of the bereaved; by using *Pyyyyyyha* she both relates to and animates the scenery:

Example 5

C [redacted] Pyyyyyyha det er nogle tunge skridt I skal tage i dag og sende jeres elskede Magnus ud på hans sidste rejse....
(Translation: Whew some heavy steps you are going to take to day sending your beloved Magnus on his last journey....)

While *åh* ‘oh’ has a rather stable spelling form (it is only prolonged occasionally by a number of *å*’s ‘*ååå*’ or *h*’s ‘*åhh*’ and a few time by *r* ‘*årh*’), the use of *puha* ‘whew’ is aberrant and more variable. The spelling of the Danish *puha* varies in at least 12 different ways as showed in section 2. In five of the variants the vowel *y* replaces the *u*, which could be seen as equivalent to the difference between relief and disapproval. In the data the alternate uses show no clear pattern, but further investigation might reveal whether certain spellings eventually will come to outmatch the others in the long run.

5. Written interjections as affective expressions

Spoken interjections are spontaneous and intense – and used in written interaction they communicate presence. In the two cases the interjections in question could be seen as a way to accentuate and thereby intensify the compassion. The followers are not just telling, but actually performing compassion and involvement; doing a compassionate “being there with you – feeling it with you”, thereby creating a joint and intense process of grief.

The function of the interjections could be seen as a ventilation of the emotional alarm system and as a way of putting the inexpressible into words. Interjections are useful when you cannot find ‘the right words’ to console another person or describe your own feelings or affective experience, because any words would only aggravate the situation or make it awkward. This is relevant both to spoken and written communication.

What the present way of analysing interjections has picked up from both affective theory and phono-semantics is the body as a base. As a lot of other studies of interjections (Ameka 1992; Goffman 1981; Poggi 2009; Scherer 1994), I see the spoken primary interjections as sounds caused by the body or bodily felt emotions, and thereby identify and emphasise the connection between the bodily felt experience that triggered the sign (the interjection) and the physical production of the sign. In relation to affect theory I therefore plead for an approach to the primary interjections as indexical reactions towards the body making certain affective sounds or experiencing some kind of affectiveness. Their written versions borrow some of this affective energy, whereby the written *åh* 'oh's and *puha* 'whew's perform presence despite the physical distance.

In the two cases the pervasive use of emotional interjections reveals a use of language that departs from sharing abstract accounts of events in a straightforward and well-planned manner (Stage & Hougaard 2018) – at least when they are characterised by redundancy (e.g. *åhhhh*) or forceful exclamations (e.g. *PUHA* or *puhhh!!*). Even though the writing process implies certain cognitive elements (e.g. awareness of audience and other pragmatic circumstances), whose importance calls for attention (and further research), I have tried to show how the use of interjections could be seen as a transformation of the affective energy into the sign production. “Signs do not always refer to matter in the world by the use of convention or resemblance, as they can also trace physical and affective processes taking place in relation to the production of the sign” (Stage & Hougaard 2018:26ff).

The use of interjections is an efficient and economical way to communicate (Hougaard 2013), owing to their brevity and immediate decoding. Even though you could call this a reduced and poor way of grieving or mourning, it may be the closest we get to the immediate emotions or affect – perhaps the true face of grief, anguish and sympathy – and a vernacular communication of grief and mourning in social media.

To articulate is both to understand and to place something in the world. In this article, interjections are seen as a way to bring the affective experience into the world, making this experience and the reactions exist, making them real and at the same time letting them go in order to be able to live on. To use certain interjections is seen as a bi-directional use of language. It is a response to the affective and bodily experience as well as a signal about experiencing this affect. The affects both engage and occupy the body, the tension dominates the system in a way that is not durable for long, and therefore the followers let go of the affects and their intensities – sometimes via interjections.

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Notes

¹ Earlier, written interjections were mostly seen in comics (Forster, Borgwaldt & Neef 2012; Bojsen 1996).

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