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## LAUGHTER INTERJECTIONS CONTRIBUTIONS TO A LEXICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF HUMOUR (WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO DANISH)

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is threefold. Firstly, it seeks to fill a gap in the literature on interjections by suggesting that ‘laughter interjections’ (words such as English *haha* or *hehe*) make up an important type of interjections that has so far not been accounted for in cross-linguistic work on interjections. Secondly, it argues that laughter interjections are thick with cultural meaning, and that they can play an important role for an “emic turn” in humour studies. Third, it develops a case study on “Danish funniness” with a point of departure in the Danish paradigm of laughter interjections. The paper explores humorous discourse from the perspective of these culturally specific expressive words, and provides high definition analysis of two Danish laughter interjections *tøho* and *hæhæ*, using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage technique of explication. The general framework of the study is Lexical Anthropology, an approach to meaning analysis that combines insights from lexical semantics and linguistic anthropology.

### 1. Laughter Interjections

Casting its spotlight on “laughter interjections”, this paper studies a group of highly marginalised expressive words. I deliberately say marginalised, rather than marginal, given that speakers of many languages, be that English (*haha*), Spanish (*jaja*), or Russian (*xaxa*), seem to find this type of interjection anything but marginal. Rather, laughter interjections seem to be useful and important in everyday communication. The marginalisation comes from years of negligence in linguistics, and even in interjection studies. Given the antipathy towards interjections in the history of linguistics (for a discussion, see Dingemanse 2017:200ff), it comes as no surprise that words like *haha*, *jaja*, *xaxa* have not been taken seriously as an object of study for typology and cross-linguistic analysis. What is more surprising is that laughter interjections seem peripheral even in interjection studies. Despite the fact that *Interjektionen*

*des Lachens* ‘laughter interjections’ were present in early comparative work on interjections (Schwentner 1924:18), the current typologies of interjections have either little or nothing to say about this type of interjection. And while the study of laughter interjections has been kept alive by occasional papers (see e.g. Kidd 2011), it is fair to say that laughter interjections are placed “in the margins of the margins” in current theorising. For the same reasons, it is now time to take laughter interjections seriously. With a case study on Danish laughter interjections the paper seeks to demonstrate how laughter interjections can make up a diverse and elaborate paradigm. The paper stresses the need for doing high-definition semantic analysis of laughter interjections and seeks to provide new standards of analysis on which future comparative and typological studies can be based.

The groundwork in semantic typology and comparative interjection studies provided by Wierzbicka (1991, 1992) and Ameka (1992) has proven to be very robust. Operating with a tripartite model in which emotive, volitive and cognitive interjections make up the key types of interjections<sup>1</sup>, both Wierzbicka and Ameka have emphasised that their classification by no means is final (see also Goddard 2011, 2014a). Emotive interjections are based on ‘feeling’, volitive interjections on ‘wanting’, and cognitive interjections on ‘thinking and/or knowing’ and I think that it is time to add to this groundwork more work on some of the less universal types of interjections. More specifically, my proposal is to add laughter interjections to the typology, not as a candidate for a universal interjection type, but as a type of interjection that exists in a number of languages, and which seems to be elaborated into whole paradigms in certain languages, such as i.e. Danish. What makes these interjections stand out, is that they are neither primarily feeling-based, wanting-based, or thinking-based; rather, they are laughing-based and semantically centred around the concept of laughing.

In the current state of comparative interjection studies, we know relatively little about the status of laughter interjections in and across the world’s languages. For future explorative semantic and typological work on laughter interjections it is important to make clear what we are talking about, and especially, what we are not talking about. Analytically, it is important to differentiate laughter interjections from both ‘laughter’ itself and various kinds of ‘representations of laughter’. Felix Ameka (personal communication) has referred to the former as “interjectionalised laughter” and this view is in accordance with the working hypotheses of this paper: Through historical processes of interjectionalisations, new expressive semantic codes have been coined and conventionalised as semantic currency within a group of speakers. In this paper, I will not discuss the issue of ‘laughter’ any further (on the semantics of ‘laughing’, see Goddard 2017, Levisen 2018b), and on laughter-in-interaction, consider the rich literature in conversation analysis, (for an overview see Glenn 2003). However, the discussion of ‘representations

of laughter' vis-à-vis laughter interjections deserves further airing: We know that laughter can be represented in various ways, through, say, the mimicking of one's conversational partner's laughter, or by performing stylised and individualised sequences of laughter. Another example is "typed laughter" in social media contexts. Such laughter representations can be performed for various purposes, without being conventionalised as words or word-like elements. By contrast, laughter interjections are conventionalised units of expressive semantics (*haha!*), which are coded just in the same way as emotive interjections (*ygh!*), volitive interjections (*pssst!*) and cognitive interjections (*aha!*).

An illustration from Bislama, a South Pacific creole, is helpful at this point because this language differs from European languages in the way it deals with laughter. Bislama is known for having a rich inventory of interjections, and for having an elaborate lexicon of expressive semantics in the form of interjections, many of which are untranslatable into European languages (Crowley 2004:32; Levisen 2016:54). The cultural scripts for laughing embedded in the verbal culture of Bislama is also very different from European scripts, but the catch is this: Bislama discourse allows for rich practices of laughter representations, but the language has no laughter interjections as such. Consider the following typical interactive examples of "turns of laughter" from Bislama-based Facebook page called 'Yumi Toktok Stret'.

- (1) *hahahah yes hahahah tet laf hahahaha*  
'hahahah yes hahahah dying of laughter hahahaha'
- (2) *ahhahahah uuuu ahahhahahaha*  
'ahhahahah uuuu ahahhahahaha'
- (3) *hahahaha simple nm. ..*  
'hahahaha that's (just) simple'

Examples (1-3) are examples of 'typed laughter' in which various combinations of the two letters *h* and *a* are used as representation of actual laughter. Until recently, Bislama was an exclusively spoken language, and contemporary Bislama linguaculture is still overwhelmingly orally-oriented. Many speakers of Bislama have produced their first written messages in Bislama as social media text or text messages on mobile phones. I will get back to the question of orality, literacy, and laughing in the discussion section.<sup>2</sup> I will also discuss the cultural conditions under which interjectionalised laughter might develop into elaborate systems of expressive semantics. For now, the main concern has been to distinguish between interjectionalised laughter and related practices, such as laughter, or written representations of laughter, and with these initial delimitations in mind, I would like to offer the following working definition for 'laughter interjections':

Laughter interjections: a sub-type of interjections based on the concept of ‘laughing’. Members of this type are words or word-like element with a conventionalised expressive semantics, that is, they are laughing-based in a semantic, encoded<sup>3</sup> and socially recognised sense, rather than in an interactive, stylised, and individual sense.

## **2. Lexical Anthropology**

Lexical Anthropology is a framework based on Levisen (2012) and Levisen and Waters (2017a). It draws on cultural and cognitive approaches to lexical semantics, as well as linguistic anthropology. In short, Lexical Anthropology operates from these four basic assumptions and principles:

1. There is no deep ontological difference between what we have traditionally called “language” and “culture”. Ways of speaking, ways of feeling, and ways of thinking, are all perspectives on human life, rather than separate modules. The American linguistic anthropologist Paul Friedrich (1989) proposed a more holistic concept of “linguaculture”, and Lexical Anthropology adopts this notion.
2. The aim of Lexical Anthropology is to “understand people through their words”, to rephrase the title of Anna Wierzbicka’s seminal book on cultural keywords from 1997. A related, but separate agenda is to study “how words do things with people”, i.e. to study of the agentive role of words in social cognition (Levisen and Waters 2017b).<sup>4</sup>
3. In Lexical Anthropology, word meaning is viewed as a kind of socio-cognitive currency (cf. Goddard & Wierzbicka 2014: ch1). This means that words are not primarily a property of the individual speaker’s “mental lexicon”, although such a thing might exist. Rather, word meanings are constitutive of larger and relatively stable linguistic worldviews, in which people’s lives in language unfold (on linguistic worldviews, see e.g. Underhill 2012).
4. Lexical Anthropology is an “emic” approach to meaning. It takes its point of departure in speakers’ own words, and often in humble-looking words that experts have dismissed, or sought to replace by “etic” terminology<sup>5</sup>. Ultimately, the approach seeks to account for the way in which emic words, at one at the same time, reflect and enact a view of the world (Wierzbicka 2016).

Having provided this short introductory overview of Lexical Anthropology as my theoretical base, I will also shortly account for how Lexical Anthropology approaches the study of “interjections” “laughter” and “humour”.

### **2.1 Lexical Anthropology and Interjections**

Lexical Anthropology considers interjections to be central in human meaning-making. While it would seem that the integration of interjections

into “linguistics proper” is now becoming more of a mainstream viewpoint (see Jensen, Hougaard, and Levisen, this volume), there are still remnants of marginalisation at play, even in progressive linguistic discourse. One of the current obstacles for the integration of interjections into linguistics is rooted in a descriptive bias that is deeply rooted in traditional thinking (see also Levisen 2016, Levisen 2018a). As an illustration, consider Schwenter’s introduction to *Die Primären Interjektionen in den Indogermanischen Sprachen* (1924):

“Es ist bekannt, daß manche Tiere, unter ihnen wohl am auffallendsten der Hund, ihre Gefühle der Freude, des Schmerzes, des Hungers, der Wut, der Überanstrengung usw. durch ganz eigenartige Laute zu erkennen geben, die sich so charakteristisch voneinander unterscheiden, daß man ohne weiteres aus ihnen auf die Stimmung des Tieres schließen kann. Man pflegt diese Stimmlaute der Tiere “Naturlaute” zu nennen, da sie den Tieren von Natur aus mitgegeben werden. Als solche Naturlaute sieht man nun auch die Lautäußerungen des Kindes, bevor es zu sprechen anfängt, an. Allmählich treten sie beim Kinde, wenn es zu sprechen gelernt hat, immer mehr zurück, da sie mehr und mehr durch sprachliche Formen verdrängt werden. Aber ganz verschwinden sie auch beim erwachsenen Menschen nicht...”(Schwentner 1924:1).<sup>6</sup>

Most linguists today would be appalled by the way in which interjections at this time was looked upon as something akin to the sounds of dogs and the sounds of children in their pre-linguistic stages, and as a primitive force of nature that had survived from its animalistic beginnings into adult language. But there are additional faulty logics at play in Schwentner and his contemporaries, that is still commonly found in metalinguistic representations: the idea that interjections are expressions of something else, such as *Freude*, *Wut*, in the case of Schwentner’s dogs. In modern dictionaries we will find plenty of examples where *wow!* is defined as an “expression of astonishment”, and *fuck* as an “expression of anger”. But the idea that interjections must be an “expression of something else” is deeply problematic from a semantic viewpoint. It is true that some interjections share elements of meaning with, say, the vocabulary of emotion-related nouns, but there is no exact equivalence between the expressive semantics of *wow!* and the descriptive semantics of *astonishment* (see Goddard 2014a, for a discussion).

In Lexical Anthropology, interjections are not viewed as subordinates in a superordinate system. Instead, they are viewed as independent semantic contributions to discourse, and consequently they deserve to be studied in their own right, and not as an appendix to something else. Interjections are viewed as auto-conceptual, that is, they are carriers of cultural and conceptual meanings in and of themselves, and their contribution to discourse is not to realise other concepts; rather, what they realise, is themselves. In other

words, saying *wow!* is not a realisation of the semantics of *astonishment*, but a realisation of the semantics of *wow!*

## 2.2 Lexical Anthropology, Humour and Laughter

The study of laughter interjections bridges humour studies and gelotology, the scientific study of laughter. However, as we have seen, laughter interjections are conceptually dissimilar to actual laughter and while there are important ties to laughter (cf. the notion “interjectionalised laughter”), the expressive semantics of laughter interjections, and the culturally specific systems of usage, suggest to us that laughter interjections are more closely aligned with linguistic humour studies, than with gelotology. The recent upsurge in linguistic humour studies (see e.g. Dynel 2013; Attardo 2017) has led to new explorations in everyday practices of “funniness”, and for Lexical Anthropology, the most interesting developments in linguistic humour studies are those of *conversational humour* (Beál and Mullan 2013, 2018), and studies in the *ethnopragmatics* of humour (Goddard 2017). These directions are cross-culturally oriented and they mainly explore humour from an emic perspective. The emic turn in humour studies means that local terms, such as the Danish word *sjov* ‘fun, funny’ (Levisen 2012: 235) or local humour metaphors such as *fed* ‘fat’, *sort* ‘black’, *plat* ‘flat’, and *syg* ‘sick’ are viewed as gateways to understanding local speech practices, and local ways of thinking (Levisen, in preparation). Laughter interjections are important for the emic turn, given that they seem to provide the researcher with a cultural catalogue of locally recognised humour types, and as such they are, or represent, a goldmine of information about local values and practices.

## 3. NSM analysis

Lexical Anthropology makes use of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) technique of reductive paraphrase. NSM analysis is a tool used in cultural-cognitive linguistics. Its characteristic feature is the analytical use of a minimal metalanguage made up of simple lexico-semantic units that are believed to have exponents across the world’s languages. These units include meanings such as ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘think’, ‘feel’, ‘do’, ‘happen’, ‘big’, ‘small’. Below, I have inserted the full list of semantic primes in the English version (based on Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2014)<sup>7</sup> and the Danish version (based on Levisen 2012 and 2017). The NSM method has been applied to wide range of studies in cross-linguistic semantics, ethnopragmatics studies, and single-language descriptions (see Goddard & Wierzbicka 2014; Peeters 2015; Ye 2017; Levisen and Waters 2017, Bromhead 2018 for some recent NSM-based studies). Also, the NSM method has been tested across a broad range of semantic domains, including emotion words, value words, personhood constructs, and ethnogeographical terms. The main advantages of NSM analysis is that it allows for a high-definition analysis and also that it can be used to study and compare meaning across languages.

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I~ME, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING~THING, PEOPLE, BODY, KIND, PART
THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE~ANOTHER
ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW
GOOD, BAD, BIG, SMALL
KNOW, THINK, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
SAY, WORDS, TRUE
DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)
MINE
LIVE, DIE
WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT
WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCH
NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF, VERY, MORE, LIKE

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Table 1. Semantic primes English exponents, grouped into related categories

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JEG~MIG, DU~DIG, NOGEN, NOGET~TING, FOLK~MENNESKER, KROP, SLAGS, DEL
DEN HER, DEN SAMME, EN ANDEN
ÉN, TO, NOGET, ALLE, MEGET~MANGE, LIDT ~FÅ
GOD, DÅRLIG, STOR, LILLE
VED, TÆNKER, VIL HA', VIL IKKE HA', HØRER, SER, FØLER
SIGER, ORD, DET PASSER
GØR, SKER, BEVÆGER SIG
ER (ET STED), DER ER, ER (NOGEN/NOGET)
MIN ~MIT~MINE
LEVER, DØR
TID~NÅR~DA, NU, FØR, EFTER, LÆNGE, KORT TID, NOGET TID, ET ØJEBLIK
STED, HER, OVER, UNDER, LANGT VÆK, TÆT PÅ, SIDE, INDENI, RØRER
IKKE, MÅSKE, KAN, FORDI, HVIS, MEGET, MERE, SOM

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Table 2 Semantic primes Danish exponents  
 (Based on Levisen 2012, Levisen 2017a)

The NSM metalanguage allows the researcher to build analytical sketches of complex word meanings. In semantic analysis, the primes are used in combination to form explication texts with the intention of representing meaning “as it is to speakers”. Consider Goddard’s explication of the English emotive interjection *yuck!* (Goddard 2014a:57).

[A] **Yuck!**

I think like this: “this is something very bad”  
I feel something very bad because of this  
I don’t want something like this to be near my mouth [m]  
I don’t want something like this to touch part of my body

The explication text is composed in semantic primes, with the addition of the semantic molecule *mouth*. Semantic molecules are low-complexity chunks of meaning, which are used as building blocks in the construction of meaning. Molecules, however, are not ultimately simple, and can be explicated themselves. According to ongoing NSM research it would seem that some molecules are universal or near-universal, whereas others are culturally specific (Goddard 2016). The molecule *mouth* [m] belongs to the group of universals. Consider now Goddard’s analysis for the English swearword *shit!* (Goddard 2015:197).

[B] **Shit!**

I know: something happened a moment before	COGNITIVE TRIGGER
I feel something bad because of it	REACTION
I want to say something bad now because of this	EXPRESSION
I want to say it in one moment	IMPULSE
because of this, I say this word: {shit}	WORD UTTERANCE
I think about this word like this:	METALEXICAL AWARENESS
“some people can feel something bad	
when they hear this word	
some people think like this: “it’s bad if someone says this word””	

In this analysis, an explicit template has been added in the right column, but the explication text is in itself similar to that of *wow!* in that it consists of semantic primes. On the compositional side, there is one major difference between *wow!* and *shit!* In the semantic architecture of swearwords such as *fuck!* *Jesus!* *Christ!* and *Damn!* there is an important element called “metalexic awareness” which adds to the semantic content a metapragmatic lexical annotation, namely that ‘some people can feel something bad when they hear this word’, and also that ‘some people can think like this: it’s bad if someone says this word’ (on metapragmatic lexical annotations, see Goddard 2014b).

NSM analysis has played an important role in interjection studies, given that NSM scholars were among the first to call attention to the comparative and typological study of interjections (Wierzbicka 1991; 1992; Ameka 1992).<sup>8</sup> In more recent times, NSM work on interjections has focused primarily on describing emotive interjections (Goddard 2014), swearwords (Goddard 2014b; Goddard 2015) and on exploring the semantics-psycholinguistics interface (Gladkova, Vanhatalo, and Goddard 2016). To my knowledge, there



are no examples of semantic explications for laughter interjections, and in the following, I will make the first attempts to provide semantic explications for laughter interjections, focusing on the Danish laughter interjections *tøhø* and *hæhæ*. But before I turn to the analysis, I will provide a general sketch of laughter interjection in Danish.

#### 4. A sketch of Danish laughter interjections

Danish appears to be particularly rich in laughter interjections.<sup>9</sup> Utilising its vowel-rich system, Danish has elaborated the domain from the *haha* model, or a hVhV template (1a-i) to a paradigm in which the majority of vowels can be used.<sup>10</sup>

##### The hVhV-template

- (4a) *Haha!*
- (4b) *Hehe!*
- (4c) *Hihi!*
- (4d) *Hoho!*
- (4e) *\*Huhu!*
- (4f) *\*Hyhy!*
- (4g) *Hæhæ!*
- (4h) *Høhø!*
- (4i) *Håhå!*

The main alternative to this general paradigm appears to be a tVhV template (2a-i), which has much fewer options:

- (5a) *\*Taha!*
- (5b) *\*Tehe!*
- (5c) *Tihi!*
- (5d) *\*Toho!*
- (5e) *\*Tuhu!*
- (5f) *\*Tyhy!*
- (5g) *\*Tæhæ!*
- (5h) *Tøhø!*
- (5i) *\*Tåhå!*

In sum, this brings us to the following series of laughter interjections: *Haha!*, *hehe!*, *hihi!*, *tih!*, *hoho!*, *hæhæ!*, *høhø!*, *tøhø!*, and *håhå!*. This list is by no means exhaustive. There are monosyllabic and even trisyllabic conventions, such as i.e. *hohoho!* the laughter of *julemanden* ‘Santa Claus’. The main point listing these words is to demonstrate that there is a quantitative richness of laughter interjections in Danish, but also to suggest that each laughter interjections is associated with a conceptual semantics of its own, distinguishable from the

other options in the paradigm. In order to demonstrate this, I have selected *tøhø* and *hæhæ* for further studies. Both of these laughter interjections have a “discursive use” (cf. Goddard 2014a:55; Stange, this volume), and they offer a glimpse into the semantic intricacies that characterize the paradigms as a whole.

The analysis is based on a pilot study with 20 Danish speakers, all undergraduate university students. In 2017, they were first asked to reflect on the meaning of the laughter interjections: *hihi*, *hoho*, *tøhø*, and *hæhæ*, and they wrote down their responses individually. After the individual written responses, a group discussion was facilitated in which the meanings were further analysed. This method, called “semantic consultation” has been used in the context of linguistic fieldwork, but it has broader applications. Its basic aim is to provide reflective ethnodata (Levisen 2016a, 2017) and as such it can be used both in small exploratory analysis, as the current study, and in fully-fledged analysis with many participants and big sets of research questions. Only the responses for *tøhø* and *hæhæ* will be a part of the present analysis.

#### **4.1 The meaning of *tøhø!***

*Tøhø!* is a rather complex interjection, and an adequate analysis requires a great deal of consideration. As we have seen, *tøhø!* belongs to the tVhV-paradigm, which seems to be a modified version of the hVhV-paradigm. Where hVhV models an uninhibited laughter, it is possible that the initial stop sound of the tVhV template has an element of iconicity to it: a stopped, or suppressed kind of laughter. To compare, the semantics of *tíhi* is linked to a prototype of a “girly” suppression of laughter, or the ironic mimicking of such girly suppression of laughter. In a similar way, *tøhø!* seems to iconically express a suppressed kind of laughter, or, rather, a type of laughter that should have been suppressed, but wasn't. Consider the following examples from Danish political discourse, and a scandal colloquially known as *rullepølse-gate*. *Rullepølse* is a type of traditionally-made rolled seasoned pork and a Danish favourite in open-faced sandwiches. *Rullepølse-gate* was a political scandal in which alleged threats were made on social media following the closing down of a factory producing *rullepølse*.

In 2014, the factory *Jørn A. Rullepølser* was closed down after the authorities found listeria in its seasoned meat, and 17 people had died as a result of eating the meat products from this factory. Such scandals are extremely rare in Denmark where food safety is of high priority. The context in which the following exchange of tweets took place can therefore be considered to be “highly unusual circumstances”. The verbal exchange includes three main characters: Karsten Hønge (a socialist), Pia Kjærsgaard (a nationalist) and Simon Emil Ammitzbøll (a liberalist). For reasons of narrative simplicity, I will in following address these politicians as the Socialist, the Nationalist and the Liberalist. The twitter exchange is inserted below:

(6a)



Zooming in on the most important part of the tweets, I have replicated the core part of the exchange below with an English translation:

(6b) The Socialist

*Kunne P Kjærsgaard dog ikke lige snuppe et stykke med rullepølse?*  
'Why don't Pia Kjærsgaard (The Nationalist) eat a piece (of ryebread) with *rullepølse* 'cured meat'?

(6c) The Liberalist

*Ønskede du lige din politiske modstander død? Træk tilbage og undskyld mens du kan*  
'Did you just wish your political opponent dead? Take it back and apologise while you still can.'

Apparently, the Socialist was so annoyed with the Nationalist's anti-Muslim rhetoric that he urged her publicly to eat some *rullepølse*. In the situational context the implicature seems clear: The Socialist wishes death over the Nationalist. At the same time, the cultural context leaves this reading unlikely. It would be unheard of in Danish political discourse to wish for the death of a political opponent. Given the general cultural scripts for the use of humour in Danish public discourse, readers would be inclined to interpret the comment as having a humorous intent. The question, however, is whether such kind of humour is acceptable, given the unusual circumstances, in which several people had just died. In his tweet, the Liberalist spells out the implicature in the form of a question: 'Did you just wish your political opponent dead?' At the same time he demands that the Socialist retracts his tweet. The rhetorical aftermath of this situation is interesting for the present paper because of the fact that *tøhø!* came to play an important role: The Socialist was reported by several media to explain his previous comment (or threat) as an example of *tøhø*-humour.

- (7) *SFer om rullepølse-tweet: Det var bare et 'tø-hø'*  
'Socialist about *rullepølse* tweet: It was just a 'tø-hø'  
(BT 19. Aug 2014)

For a short time, the interjection *tøhø!* was a “keyword of the moment” in Danish public discourse, and since no dictionaries could explain its meaning, and journalists were eager to understand and determine what the Socialist had really meant. When further questioned about the meaning of his use of *tøhø*, the Socialist elaborated by giving yet another example of *tøhø*.

- (8) *Hun får jo ondt i røven, hver gang hun ser en muslim. Se, det var også en lille tø-hø, siger Karsten Hønge.*  
'Her ass (i.e the Nationalist's ass) hurts every time she sees a Muslim. Look, that was also a small *tø-hø*, Karsten Hønge (the Socialist) says'  
(BT 19. Aug 2014).

*Tø-hø* is being assigned a noun status in the journalists' representation of the Socialist's comments. Both of the two Danish genders *et tø-hø* (neuter), and *en tø-hø* (uter) were used in media discourse, and this suggest to us that the shift to a noun status is unusual. But regardless of word class, I believe that this concrete example can help us to explore the prototypical cognitive scenario linked with the semantics of *tøhø!* Interestingly, while *tøhø!* does not have an entry in any Danish dictionary, all semantic consultants in my pilot study were happy to explain what *tøhø!* means. Bearing in mind that none of the students were thinking about *rullepølse*-gate, their reflections still provide a helpful metalinguistic commentary that can help us to interpret the specific case. The consultants said:

- (9) *lidt over strengen, men stadigvæk lidt sjovt*  
'going a bit too far, but still a bit funny'  
(10) *udtryk for at noget ikke var rigtig sjovt, men nærmere faldt til jorden*  
'an expression that something wasn't really funny, rather it fell flat'  
(11) *når noget måske egentligt ikke helt er hylende morsomt*  
'when something perhaps isn't really that totally amusing'

These comments all point to a kind of failed humour that is *over strengen* 'over the line', and which *faldt til jorden* 'fell to the ground'. With an ironic description it is deemed *ikke hylende morsomt*, literally, 'not howlingly amusing'. Another theme emerging from the reflective ethnodata is the link between *tøhø!*, the adjective *plat*, and the related noun *plathed*. *Plat* is a hard-to-translate Danish term that is commonly used in Danish humour criticism (Levisen, in press). Translations of *plat* include 'flat', 'course', and 'vulgar':

- (12) *det er sjovt, men også lidt plat/ikke så sjovt*  
'it's funny but also a bit *plat*/not so funny'  
(13) *reaktionen på en plat vittighed*  
'reaction to a *plat* joke'  
(14) *en lidt plat form for humor*  
'a bit *plat* kind of humour'

Also, the consultations pointed to a particular social profile or stereotypical usage, linking *tøhø* with a *faragtigt* 'dad-like' or *onkel-agtig* 'uncle-like' sense of humour.

- (15) *far-humor*  
'dad humour'  
(16) *noget halv-perverst eller faragtigt eller måske mere onkel-agtigt*  
'something half perverted or dad-like or perhaps more uncle-like'  
(17) *der er noget "gammelt" over det? En ældre herre som morer sig over noget sjovt*  
'there's something "old" about it? An old man who is amused about something funny'

Finally, the respondents also commented on the "discursive" or "meta-interactive" nature of *tøhø!*

- (18) *det siger man efter noget halv-perverst*  
'you say that after something half-perverted'  
(19) *man ved at man har været irriterende*  
'you know you've been annoying'  
(20) *tøhø lyder mere som noget man bruger, hvis det skal symbolisere kiksethed*  
'*tøhø* sounds like something you use to symbolise awkwardness'

Based on these reflections, we can begin to form hypotheses on the meaning of *tøhø!* In an NSM explication, I would venture the following analysis:

**[C] Semantic Explication for *tøhø!***

when I said something before,	INTENTION
I said it because I wanted people here to laugh [m]	
I know now that some people here can think like this:	SOCIAL RECEPTION
there is not much to laugh [m] about	
at the same time I know that people here	CONSEQUENCES
can think something bad because of it,	
not something very bad	

I think about this word like this:

SOCIAL PROFILE

“when people want to say something  
about how old [m] men [m] say something  
when they want other people to laugh [m],  
they can say it with this word.

Testing the explication on the *rullepølse*-gate, we can see that the Socialists’ intention was humorous ‘I want people to laugh [m]’, but that the social reception makes him realise that the humorous intention did not work, cf. ‘some people here can think like this: there is not much to laugh [m] about’. The consequences are modelled as: ‘people can feel something bad because of it, but with the addition ‘not something very bad.’<sup>11</sup>

Following the insights from the consultants, the social profile of *tøhø* is modelled on the prototype of, roughly, “old men’s sense of humour”, and the explication makes use of the semantic molecules laugh [m], old [m] and men [m]. The fact that the Socialist (b. 1958) might have used the social stereotype suggested by *tøhø!* in order to excuse himself, and rhetorically defend himself in *rullepølse*-gate along the lines of ‘this is what old men like me sometimes do’ is interesting, but remains difficult to prove. What is important is the general principle. *Tøhø!*’s meaning can be explicated, and its prototypical semantics can be stated clearly.

#### 4.2 The meaning of *hæhæ!*

The consultants characterised *hæhæ!* in the following way:

- (21) *Den mere onde latter, der forbindes med at man gør/siger noget lidt tarveligt/ondt, men i god mening/for sjovt*  
‘the more evil kind of laughter related to doing/saying something mean, but with good intentions/for fun’
- (22) *Ondskabsfuldt grin. Kan også siges med humor dog, som hvis man får mange point i et brætspil*  
‘Evil laughter. But it can be said with humour, like if you get many points in a board game’
- (23) *Har et grovt udtryk og kan anvendes i ondsindede sammenhænge .... Hæhæ har også noget varmt over sig*  
‘Have a coarse expression to it and can be used in mean contexts... there’s also something warm about *hæhæ*.

What strikes me in these definitions is the combination of the words *ond* ‘evil’ with *sjov* ‘fun’, and even *ondsindet* ‘malevolent’ with *varm* ‘warm’. The key to understanding this link must be to propose a semantics of “good intention, despite bad content”, which, of course, is quite common in humour, and especially in teasing. The benevolent frame provided by the phrases *for sjovt*

‘for fun’ and *med humor* ‘with humour’, and the cultural practice of *drille* ‘tease’ are also mentioned by the consultants:

- (24) *lidt drilleagtigt*  
‘a bit teasing-like’  
(25) *når man “driller” en person*  
‘when you “tease” somebody’  
(26) *gavtyvsagtigt*  
‘rascal-like’

Now, let us take a closer look at three examples provided by the consultants:

- (27) *hæhæ, så kan du lære det!*  
‘hæhæ, that’ll teach you!’  
(28) *hæhæ, jeg har taget din oplader*  
‘hæhæ – I’ve taken your charger’  
(29) *hæhæ, jeg har lige set Martin & Maria gå hånd i hånd*  
‘hæhæ, I’ve just seen Martin & Maria walking hand in hand’

In (27), two friends are playing a board game, and one of the players make a move on the board that is bad for the other player. This is followed by a *hæhæ!* and a mock-domination phrase *så kan du lære det!* ‘that’ll teach you’, literally, ‘now you can learn it’. In (28), a person can’t find the charger for her mobile phone and her friend says *hæhæ!*, I’ve taken your charger. The person who took the charger knew that it would be bad for this other person, yet the very undramatic theme of the conflict is telling. In (29), Martin and Maria have been exposed as being together as a couple. They were holding hands and thought they were doing so in hiding, but somebody saw them and said: *hæhæ!* Based on such examples, all of which could be explained as “schadenfreude light”, I will propose the following explication for *hæhæ!*

**[D] Semantic explication for *hæhæ!***

I did something before  
because of this, something bad happened to someone else  
I can feel something good now because of it  
when it is like this, I can laugh [m]  
this other someone can do the same

The general semantic architecture of the *hæhæ!* is based on a model where a person’s action causes something bad to happen to someone else, which in turn causes good feelings in the person who does the action (the first three lines of the explication). This, in turn, is mitigated through a potential for mutual laughter (the final two lines of the explication).

As a more speculative note on meaning and origin of *hæhæ*, I would like to suggest that *hæhæ!* makes use of the letter ‘æ’ for a reason. In Danish social consciousness, the vowel letter ‘æ’ seems to be considered as one of the aesthetically least pleasing of all the many vowel letters. I am not aware of any study that provides hard evidence for the fact that æ is considered to be ugly, but it seems intuitively true. For instance, we can note that there are no Danish first names, and only very few surnames with the æ-letter. If a name were respelled with an ‘æ’, such as Ælse instead of Else, it would be considered an aesthetic violation. We can also note that a number of prominent æ-based words such as ækel ‘disgusting’ *hæslig* ‘hideous’, *bæ* ‘crap’ carry aesthetically displeasing semantic content, along with words describing unfortunate things *æggerlig* ‘annoying, vexing’ and *æv* ‘ugh!, dammit!’. What I am suggesting is that speakers might assign certain aesthetic values with different vowel letters, and also, that a certain degree of phonesthesia and “ideologies of letters” might play a role in the coinage of interjections. In any case, the meaning of *hæhæ!* seems linked to a theme of *schadenfreude*, and this seems compatible with the ugliness of the æ.

### **5. On the typology of interjections: perspectives and discussion**

In this final section, I would like to offer some further perspectives on the emerging typology of interjections, as well as some initial thoughts on the socio-cultural conditions that allow for an elaboration of laughter interjections in linguacultures. My addition to the basic typology of interjections is represented below in italics:

#### **Semantic typology of interjections**

Emotive interjections	– feeling-based expressive meanings
Volitive interjections	– wanting-based expressive meanings
Cognitive interjections	– thinking-based expressive meanings
<i>Gelotive interjections</i>	– <i>laughing-based expressive meaning</i>

In this typology, I have added “gelotive interjections” as an etic term for what I have so far called “laughter interjections”. The rationale for this additional name is not philosophically, but rhetorically grounded. Since etic terms tend to be taken more seriously in academic discourses, it is my hope that “gelotive interjections” from gelotology, the study of laughter, might give the prestige that is needed to advance the cross-linguistic and typological study of laughter interjections.

It is important to reiterate that “gelotive interjections” are not proposed as a universal category, but as a subtype whose cross-linguistic prevalence and distribution has not yet been surveyed. Perhaps it is useful to compare gelotive interjections with another non-universal category of interjections, namely the category of “swearword” interjections. The family of European



“swearing” related metacategories, such as e.g. Danish *bande* ‘swear’ and *bandeord* ‘swearword’ has a history formed by taboos in religion, and by petty-bourgeois preferences for verbal hygiene (on linguistic taboos, see e.g. Allan and Burridge 2006). The point of the comparison is this: in all linguacultures, people can say ‘bad words’, or rather, words that are thought of as bad in certain situations, but that does not make them “swearwords” in this European sense. Similarly, in all linguacultures, people can laugh and talk about laughing, but that does not necessarily lead to the emergence of gelotive interjections.

What remains to be studied is how widespread laughing-based interjections are, and how common it is that they develop into elaborate semantic paradigms such as in the case of Danish. Until we have empirical evidence from a wider range of the world’s languages we can’t be certain of either the issue of prevalence or the issue of elaboration. In a study on English historical interjections, the historical pragmaticist Irma Taavitsainen (1995) says:

“Interjections in writing may have been produced in imitation of spoken language, but still under the constraints of a written medium, and their meaning has to be interpreted without the help of intonation” (Taavitsainen, 1995:440).

Taavitsainen’s study remind us of the oral nature of interjections. But also, her study on the transformation of interjections into a literacy-based era of English provide clues to the question of what linguacultural conditions are likely to cultivate gelotive interjections. It seems to me that the orality/literacy question might play an important part in “interjectionability”, and based on my initial observations, I will venture the following hypothesis: perhaps laughing-based interjections are the product of a literate mindset. My hypothesis goes along the following lines: interjectionalised laughter might, at least prototypically, be the product of literacy-based linguacultures in which vowels are conceptualised as “letters”, and in which specific cultural practices of laughing can be catalogued through interjectionalised. The hypothesis is congruent with the fact that some languages with numerous interjections and elaborate systems of expressive semantics seem to have no laughter interjections (e.g. Bislama), while languages with fewer interjections and less elaborate expressive semantics have developed a highly specialised system of interjections – the gelotive one’s – interjections that represent different types of “humour” (e.g. Danish). Another argument in favour of this hypothesis is the almost “cartoonish” ring of at least some of the Danish laughter interjections, and the lack of immediacy that characterises the paradigm as a whole. It would be interesting to undertake more studies in the borderland of laughter, representations of laughter, and laughter interjections within an orality/literacy framework, and more research into the historical semantics and pragmatics of laughter interjections is needed.

## 6. Concluding remarks

As interjection studies are becoming more mainstream in linguistics, a new emphasis on the variation and cultural diversity of interjections is needed. Laughter interjections, or “gelotive interjections” is one of such new arenas of exploratory interjection research, and future studies in cross-semantic and lexical-typological research might uncover several other non-universal subcategories of interjections. The priority for the study of interjectionalised laughter would be to (i) collect a sample of languages with gelotive interjections in order to explore the ways in which they have been elaborated cross-linguistically, and (ii) to provide a semantic and linguacultural analysis of specific gelotive interjections in order to test their potentials in terms of meaning. Lexical Anthropology can be used as a framework to facilitate such linguacultural analysis, and NSM techniques can be used to propose high-definition analyses of interjections following the model presented in this paper.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Various alternative typologies exist, but these are often based on a single language, rather than the comparative or typological studies. Consider for instance Nordgren’s study of Greek interjections (2015:16). Stange (2016) has proposed a continuum-based typology for the study of British English.
- <sup>2</sup> The question of how interjections are realised across written and spoken registers is obviously an important aspect of the study of interjections, and so is the study of

interjections across social media and internet genres. It goes beyond the scope of this paper to provide any register analyses, genre analysis, or media analysis. The analytical aim is to provide a general linguacultural analysis that can be further elaborated through register and genre analyses, as well as media-linguistic analysis.

- <sup>3</sup> “Encoded” is short for a fixed association between a word and a meaning, known by and relied on by a group of speakers.
- <sup>4</sup> This aim has been formulated in opposition to the classical speech-act theoretical paradigm, with its emphasis on radically free and rational individuals, in whose power it is to “do things with words”.
- <sup>5</sup> The terms *emic* and *etic* have origin in Pike (1967), but today the terms are used widely across disciplines such as cross-cultural psychology, intercultural pragmatics, semantic typology, etc.
- <sup>6</sup> *It is well known that some animals, most notably dogs, show feelings of joy, pain, hunger, anger, over-exertion, etc. through peculiar sounds that are recognisably different from each other, so that one, based on these, easily can determine the mood of the animal. Usually, these vocal sounds of animals are called “natural sounds” because animals have been equipped with these sounds from nature. Such natural sounds are also found in the vocalisations of infants before they learn to speak. Gradually, as children learn to speak, these sounds wane as they are being replaced by linguistic forms. But they do not completely disappear even in adult humans (own translation).*
- <sup>7</sup> Exponents of primes exist as the meanings of lexical units, not at the level of lexemes. Exponents of primes may be words, bound morphemes or phrasemes. Exponents of primes can be formally complex. Exponents of primes can have language-specific combinatorial variants (allolexes indicated with ~). Exponents have well-specified syntactic (combinatorial) properties.
- <sup>8</sup> From the perspective of Danish, it is interesting to note that the interjection *fy!* was the very first Danish word to be studied with NSM tools (Wierzbicka 1991 [2003:307-308]).
- <sup>9</sup> It remains to be studied how widespread laughter interjections are, and it also remains to be studied how many different laughter interjections there are within each language that allows for such a category. The other Scandinavian languages and German appear to have many, whereas for instance Spanish and English appear to have few. We cannot make the prediction that having many vowels leads to many laughter interjections. But in the Danish case, the affordances of a vowel-rich system does seem to have offered speakers a broad array of ways to interjectionalise laughter.
- <sup>10</sup> I have discussed the possibilities within these two paradigms with several groups of Danish students at Roskilde University since 2015 (see acknowledgments), and I have developed these two tables based on these consultations.
- <sup>11</sup> This “dedramatising element” needs to be further checked across corpora of texts and discursive situations. It might have to be slightly reworded to capture the general semantics of *tøhø!*

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