



HAL
open science

Where have all the interjections gone

Aimée Lahaussais

► **To cite this version:**

Aimée Lahaussais. Where have all the interjections gone: A look into the place of interjections in contemporary grammars of endangered languages. Carlos Assunção; Gonçalo Fernandes; R. Kemmler. Tradition and Innovation in the History of Linguistics, Nodus Publikationen, pp.186-195, 2016, 978-3-89-323-021-1. hal-01361106

HAL Id: hal-01361106

<https://hal.science/hal-01361106>

Submitted on 23 Apr 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Aimée Lahaussais

Histoire des théories linguistiques (UMR 7597) CNRS/Université Paris Diderot

Where have all the interjections gone?

A look into the place of interjections in contemporary grammars of endangered languages

Interjections have been described as “universal yet neglected” (Ameka 1992) and from the perspective of descriptive linguistics, this certainly seems to be the case: in contemporary descriptions of endangered languages, it is rare to find a chapter or even section on interjections. In this presentation, I shall explore a corpus of descriptive grammars of languages of Nepal and look at the place given to interjections. I shall then explore the structures of these grammars and the backgrounds of the linguists who wrote them, in order to find some explanations for the noticeable absence of interjections.

Keywords: interjection, endangered languages, Nepal, grammaticography

1. Introduction

In reviewing the typology books and manuals used in training field linguists, it quickly becomes apparent that the interjection, already a marginal part of speech historically (often the last part of speech in lists provided in grammars), has further lost status. A much-used field manual, Payne's *Describing Morphosyntax* (1997), contains no mention whatsoever of interjections. In Givón's *Syntax: a functional-typological introduction* (1984), the description of interjections is so brief that budding field linguists will not be able to classify words as interjections on its basis: "Most languages display this mixed-bag category with expressions such as 'yes', 'no', 'hey', 'oh', 'hi', 'wow', 'ouch', etc. or their functional equivalents. It is not a unified category functionally, morphologically or syntactically and it is highly language specific." (1984: 84). Creissels' *Syntaxe générale: une introduction typologique* (2006) mentions interjections, but only to provide a contrast with ideophones:

Pour une caractérisation plus précise des idéophones en tant qu'espèce de mots, il faut d'abord insister sur le fait qu'on ne peut pas en faire des interjections. Les interjections ont parfois des possibilités limitées d'expansion, mais s'emploient typiquement en isolation, alors que les idéophones ne s'emploient que marginalement en isolation, et participent normalement à la construction de phrase. (Creissels 2006: 257).

Contemporary grammars of endangered languages also reveal an absence of treatment of interjections: a prototype database I built of the tables of contents of 200 contemporary descriptive grammars makes it clear that the interjection has a very small, if any, place in these descriptions. In this article, I examine a sub-corpus of contemporary grammars of endangered languages of Nepal, in order to look at the place of the interjection within the grammars. I shall also present several hypotheses to explain the omission of the interjection from a large part of the corpus.

2. Corpus of grammars of languages of Nepal

A geographically delimited corpus of twelve grammars of languages of Nepal was chosen for this study. The languages are from the Tibeto-Burman language family, and they are all oral, endangered languages, for which there is no prior description or grammatical tradition. As they are typologically similar, the structures of the grammars can be meaningfully compared, as they share a large number of cognate words, features and constructions.

The corpus is made up of grammars of the following twelve languages (listed chronologically, with authors' names and date of publication):

- Khaling (S. Toba, 1984)
- Limbu (G. van Driem, 1987)
- Dumi (G. van Driem, 1993)
- Camling (K. Ebert, 1997)
- Yamphu (R. Rutgers, 1998)
- Kham (D. Watters, 2002)
- Wambule (J.-R. Opgenort, 2004)
- Jero (J.-R. Opgenort, 2005)
- Dolakha Newar (C. Genetti, 2007)
- Sunwar (D. Borchers, 2008)
- Bantawa (M. Doornenbal, 2009)
- Thangmi (M. Turin, 2012)

The grammars in the corpus were searched for any chapters or sections on interjections; in cases where these were not found, I searched the text sections for anything else that might contain information on interjections, namely sections on particles, emotions, exclamations.

I looked at the list of abbreviations (found at the beginning of most grammars, since gloss abbreviations are used throughout the examples) to see whether

'interjection' was present; in cases where it was, I looked through the glossary (typically found as an appendix to these grammars) to find lexemes labeled as interjections, seeking to understand whether there was a clear representation for the grammarians of the category of interjection (when present) or whether the term was used by default.

The investigation resulted in the following typology for the grammars in the corpus, according to their treatment of interjections:

- a) interjection is a section of the grammar (Khaling, Kham)
- b) interjection explicitly mentioned within the text of the grammar but not a chapter or section heading (Bantawa)
- c) interjection not discussed but found in list of abbreviations or glossary (Camling, Thangmi, Wambule, Yamphu, Dumi, Limbu)
- d) interjection present nowhere in grammar (Dolakha, Sunwar, Jero)

3. Discussion of the typology of grammars

3.1 Type (a)

Exemplifying category (a) within the typology laid out above, the grammar of Khaling (Toba 1984) has a discrete, albeit short, chapter on interjections. Figure 1 represents the entire chapter on interjections. Even though there is little to say on the topic, the status of the interjection as a part of speech warrants discrete treatment for Toba.

38

11. INTERJECTIONS

minaa 'well now' introducing an utterance or a new topic of importance.

māki, maakaa, mana 'right', 'I see' response of the listener, not necessarily agreement.

āyi, āyeye 'is that so!' surprise over something seen or heard.

aakaave 'it hurts!'

ehoy 'hey!' calling some one far away.

hou 'hey!' calling some one, always used together with the name of the person called. The name precedes the interjection.

aa 'yes'.

mo 'no'

anlaasō 'thank you'

nūwo, ne 'please take this!' (giving a gift, offering food to a guest).

do 'let's go!' always followed by a finite verb form.

Figure 1. The chapter on Interjections in the grammar of Khaling.

The other grammar representing (a) in the typology is the grammar of Kham (Watters 2002), which devotes a distinct and titled section to interjections within the chapter entitled “Minor Word Classes.” The section begins with the following definition: “Interjections are primarily single word, emotive outbursts that do not enter into syntactic relations with other parts of the grammar. Very often, in fact, they occur in isolation and stand alone as full utterances.” (Watters 2002: 188). This is followed by a list of interjections accompanied by their semantic classification and translations. The semantic classification used to categorize the various interjections in Kham are the following: affirmation, attracting attention, surprise, exasperation, apology, commiseration, pain.

In both the grammars of Khaling and Kham, type (a) in our classification of grammars, interjections are featured as a distinct section or chapter in the grammars, but these sections are essentially a list of interjections with little or no discussion.

3.2 Type (b)

Representative of type (b) are grammars which explicitly mention interjections in the text without giving them billing as section or chapter titles. The one grammar in the corpus of this type is the grammar of Bantawa (Doornenbal 2009). The following is a partial table of contents for the grammar:

- Introduction
- Phonology
- Nominals
- Verbs
- Subordination
- Transitivity operations
- Complex verbs
- Other Word Classes
 - Adjectives
 - Adverbs
 - Particles
 - Conjunctions
 - Narrative and direct speech marker <ni>
 - Something <kha>

The section on Particles breaks down further into the following subsections:

- Topic and focus markers
- Emphasis and focus markers
- Epistemic and modal particles
- Sentence particles

Mention of interjections is found within the subsection entitled 'Sentence particles', which is made up of a brief explanation of the phenomenon:

There is a host of expressions that serve as full sentences or as full statements on their own. To some extent, some can be analysed into their constituting parts and in some expressions some structure is still discernible, but as a rule these particles must just be learnt by a new speaker of Bantawa. Sentence particles serve as full statements or interjections. (Doornenbal 2009: 317)

This explanation is followed by a list of seven forms, given with their translations and some commentary, and followed by the comment: "The list is not at all exhaustive, but to my subjective judgment these interjections are both frequent and important."

3.3 Type (c)

Type (c), in which interjections are not discussed in the text of the grammar but are found in the list of abbreviations or the glossary, is the most common type among the grammars in the corpus, with half of the grammars falling in this category. One example is the grammar of Yamphu (Rutgers 1998). The term interjection is found nowhere in the text of the grammar. The abbreviations list, given at the beginning of the grammar, contains glosses for 'exclamation', 'interjection', 'onomatopoeic', 'particle'. In the glossary we find that some lexical items have been assigned to the category of interjections, but with no discussion:

æbhiʔ, interj. watch out!

eŋgam interj. expresses pity on somebody's bad fortune

ho, interj. hey

ĩhĩʔ interj. uh-huh, yeah, yes

ĩ: interj. yeah, that's right

lakkhe interj. hang on, wait a minute

What is interesting about this very common scenario is that it shows us that the interjection is a real category to field linguists in terms of word categorization, but one the grammars do not attempt to define for the language of description.

3.4 Type (d)

The final type in the corpus is made up of grammars that make no mention whatsoever of interjections, either in the text of the grammar, or in the appended abbreviations or glossary.

The two grammars which fit this type are of the languages Sunwar (Börchers 2008) and Dolakha Newar (Genetti 2007), and in both, alternative terms are used--'exclamation' (Sunwar, Dolakha Newar) and 'expressive vocabulary' (Dolakha Newar)--but these terms are only found within the glossary. Sunwar has, for example, the following entry (2008: 279): "*e exclamation* hey" (Note, in contrast, that Rutgers (1998) glosses Yamphu *ho* 'hey' as an interjection, and Ebert (1997) glosses Camling *ei* 'hey' as an interjection as well.) As these occurrences of terms other than 'interjection' are all exclusively limited to glossaries, it does not seem that they reflect

any theoretical position of the authors on the definition or status of the interjection, but rather the result of habit or training.

4. Analysis

In proceeding with the analysis of the data from the corpus, a few issues affecting the distribution of grammars in our typology must be taken into account:

- 1) How close is the structure of the grammar to 'traditional grammar'?
- 2) What is the purpose of the description?
- 3) What is the background of the linguist?

Looking at the distribution of grammars in our typology in light of these issues reveals some interesting patterns. When looking at the structure of the grammars and its proximity to traditional grammar, we note that, of the grammars in the corpus, Khaling and Kham, the only two grammars to have chapters or sections devoted to interjections, have layouts that are the closest to traditional grammar outlines.

The table of contents of the grammar of Khaling is structured around the parts of speech, with the following chapters (in order of appearance): Introduction, Phonology, Nouns, Pronouns, Numerals, Verbs, Adjectives, Adverbs, Conjunctions, Particles, Interjections. In some cases, these chapters (such as that on interjections) make up a single page, but what is relevant is that the author has accorded them a status equal to fundamental parts of speech such as nouns and verbs.

The organization of the Kham grammar is somewhat less obviously a traditional grammar layout, but the parts of speech still come through clearly in the table of contents as an organizing principle:

- People and their language
- Segmental phonology
- Tonology
- Nouns and noun morphology
- Verbs and verb morphology
- Modifiers and adjectivals
- Locatives, dimensionals and temporal adverbs
- Adverbs and adverbials
- Minor word classes
 - Pronouns
 - Demonstratives
 - Question words and indefinite pronouns
 - Quantifiers, numerals, and classifiers
 - Particles and clitics
 - Interjections and expletives
 - Coordination markers

Noun phrases, nominalizations and relative clauses
Simple clauses, transitivity and voice
Tense, aspect and modality
The modality of certainty, obligation, unexpected information
Non-declarative speech acts
Interclausal relations and sentence structure
Nominalized verb forms in discourse
The Kham verb in historical perspective
Texts
Vocabulary

No other grammars in the corpus have a structure which is so closely modeled on traditional grammar, and it is interesting to find that this correlates with the presence of discussion of interjections in these texts, with the grammatical template offering up a category that might otherwise get overlooked by descriptive linguists.

Among the authors of the non-traditional grammars in the corpus, several of them justify the organization and terminology adopted in their grammars. Genetti, in the grammar of Dolakha Newar, makes the following statement:

An advantage of the functionalist framework in the writing of descriptive grammars is that it is sufficiently flexible to allow the language to be seen in its own terms. There are no theoretical requirements that certain types of categories be present in every language--even lexical categories as common as noun and verb may not be found in all languages. One needs to look at the details of the language to see if the presence of such categories is justified. (Genetti 2007:27)

This is typical of a trend in descriptive grammars whereby the structure of the description derives from the typologically salient features of the language rather than some externally-imposed structuring device.

Doornenbal, in the grammar of Bantawa, expresses ideas of a similar nature:

Every language deserves a description in its own terms. To try and apply foreign terminology to a language does not always clarify the issues. In the case of Bantawa, this consideration has not led me to invent or reinvent terminology that may obscure obvious and common linguistic similarities or facts. However, given that Bantawa needs a description in its own terms led me to focus on the issues that are significant for Bantawa. (Doornenbal 2009: 2)

These passages by Genetti and Doornenbal suggest that they feel that a traditional grammar template, functioning like a check-list of parts of speech, should be rejected in favor of a language-driven organization. It is not surprising, in this light, to see poorly-defined categories such as the interjection left aside by authors adopting this approach.

The second issue that appears to have an influence on whether or not the interjection is featured in the grammar is the purpose of the description. For both Kham and Khaling, fieldwork was carried out within a missionary project, the goal

being to translate the New Testament into the minority languages. Both descriptions -- although resulting in grammars of very different lengths (40 pages for Khaling vs. 477 pages for Kham)--were thus based on very long periods of residence in the field. This long-term exposure to the language could offer another explanation for the presence of interjections, as the latter are best encountered through situational and narrative contexts due to the great difficulty in eliciting them in targeted work sessions. In contrast, the other grammars were written after academically-oriented fieldwork, focusing on morphosyntax and highlighting the unique features of the language. Among the grammars examined, the overwhelming trend found is precisely that: the languages of Nepal are notorious for their rich verbal morphology, and as a result, verbs are featured prominently in the grammars in the corpus. Another interesting feature of these languages is nominal case-marking and extensive nominalization patterns (covering infinitives, participles, relative clauses, attributive functions, among others) and as such nominal morphology plays a major part in the non-traditional grammar descriptions in the corpus.

The background of the linguists also seems to affect the grammars they produce and whether or not interjections are featured within them. We noted that Toba and Watters carried out their fieldwork within the framework of missionary projects, which may, because of a long missionary grammatical tradition, have affected the grammar templates chosen for the descriptions. At any rate, the type of interaction which results from missionary work would have exposed the authors, over many years in the field, to interjections in a way that linguists spending intensive but shorter amounts of time in the field may not have encountered to the same extent. The training received by later academic linguists in the corpus, whose research was carried out in the 1990's and 2000's, would have resulted in exposure to field methods through typology books and manuals, which, as we saw earlier, have very little to say about the interjection.

The degree of language endangerment of the languages within the corpus probably also has an indirect effect on whether interjections are part of the resulting description: because of the small number of speakers and the fact that there is no written standard to refer to, endangered languages, when compared to non-endangered languages, show considerable inter- and intra-speaker variation, with "an additional layer of variation" even compared with oral languages which are not endangered (Grinevald 2007: 45). For such languages, collecting consistent and reliable data about the core of the language is quite a challenge, and the situation is getting more challenging as time passes and the endangerment situation becomes more severe. The phonological marginality of interjections can lead to even greater variation than is found elsewhere in the language, resulting in difficulties in determining which form to put in a grammar. Additionally, in a sociolinguistic context where it is complicated to determine what constitutes a standard native speaker, linguists might choose to omit from their descriptions any linguistic data about which they have doubts, and the unusual phonological (but also semantic and syntactic) status of interjections, compared to the core of the language, means that data on this part of speech may not be consistent enough to warrant inclusion.

5. Conclusion

We found, within the examined corpus, a correlation between grammars written by missionaries having carried out fieldwork in the 1970's over long periods of time and the explicit presence of interjections within the grammar as a distinct part of speech.

It seems that the traditional grammar template favored by linguists with a missionary goal brings to the fore aspects of the language otherwise left aside because of their marginal status. The grammars including sections on interjections are also the result of very long periods spent in the field, exposing the linguists to a more complete and situationally rich version of the language than can be obtained through work over shorter periods using elicitation techniques which focus on specific language features and constructions.

When sections on interjections are present, however, they are, apart from a short introductory definition, lists of lexical items with contextual translations, unlike chapters or sections on other parts of speech which use data to exemplify a concept but are not exclusively based on lists of data.

As for primarily academic linguists' grammars, they tend not to have sections on interjections. The most common scenario among the academic grammars in our corpus is that the term interjection is found as a gloss for certain words in the lexicon found at the end of grammar. A few possible explanations for this are that less time in the field results in less exposure to interjections--which are notoriously difficult to elicit and usually emerge in narrative corpora or in spontaneous interactive contexts. One example of this phenomenon is found by comparing the grammars of Wambule and Jero, both written by the same linguist, but after different amounts of time in the field: the grammar of Wambule, written as a doctoral dissertation after many years in the field, is a (c) in our typology (interjections are found in the glossary but not described in the text of the grammar), while the grammar of Jero, published the following year after less in-depth field research, is a (d), with no occurrence anywhere in the grammar or glossary. This substantiates the following claim:

Although there are a good many linguistic descriptions that fail to mention interjections, it seems likely that all languages do in fact have such a class of words. In the case of extinct languages interjections may not be attested in the written records because of the generally informal, colloquial character of this word class. In the case of modern languages, the omission of interjections from a linguistic description probably just signifies that the description is incomplete. (Schachter 2007: 57)

Field manuals and typology books tend to focus on elements that participate in morphosyntactic constructions, and only rarely mention interjections, reinforcing their marginal treatment in grammars. When interjection-like elements are present, terms which are more specific and easier to define are used, such as onomatopoeion, exclamation, ideophone, or linguists favor more general terms, such as 'particle', a term which is almost pointedly undefined.

This trend does not seem limited to languages of Nepal: in the *Dictionnaire des langues* (Bonvini *et al.* 2011), the index contains references to all traditional parts of speech, except for the interjection. The authors contributing to the book had space constraints for their chapters on individual languages, but nonetheless, of all the parts of speech, only the interjection receives no treatment whatsoever.

References

- Ameka, F.K. 1992. "Interjections: The universal yet neglected part of speech", *Journal of Pragmatics* 18.2. 101-118.
- Bonvini, Emilio, Joëlle Busutil & Alain Peyraube (eds) (2011). *Dictionnaire des langues*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Borchers, Dörte. 2008. *A Grammar of Sunwar: Descriptive Grammar, Paradigms, Texts and Glossary*. Brill's Tibetan Studies Library. Languages of the Greater Himalayan Region, 5,7. Leiden: Brill
- Creissels, Denis. 2006. "Syntaxe générale une introduction typologique 1: catégories et constructions", 1/2, Paris, Hermès - Lavoisier
- Doornenbal, Marius. 2009. *A Grammar of Bantawa: Grammar, Paradigm Tables, Glossary and Texts of a Rai Language of Eastern Nepal*. Utrecht: LOT.
- Driem van, George. 1987. *A grammar of Limbu*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Driem van, George. 1993. *A grammar of Dumi*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Ebert, Karen. 1997. *Camling (Chamling)*. Munich: Lincom Europa.
- Genetti, Carol. 2007. *A Grammar of Dolakha Newar*. (Mouton Grammar Library 40.) Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Givón, Talmy. 1984. *Syntax: A functional-typological introduction*. Vol 1. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Grinevald, Colette. 2007. "Encounters at the brink: linguistic fieldwork among speakers of endangered languages." In: Miyaoka, O., O. Sakiyama & M. Krauss (eds), *The Vanishing Languages of the Pacific Rim*. Oxford, Oxford University Press
- Opgenort, Jean Robert. 2004. *A Grammar of Wambule. Grammar, Lexicon, Texts and Cultural Survey of a Kiranti Tribe of Eastern Nepal*. Brill's Tibetan Studies Library. Languages of the Greater Himalayan Region, 2. Leiden: Brill.
- Opgenort, Jean Robert. 2005. *A Grammar of Jero. With a historical Comparative Study of the Kiranti Languages*. Brill's Tibetan Studies Library. Languages of the Greater Himalayan Region, 3. Leiden: Brill.
- Payne, Thomas. 1997. *Describing morphosyntax*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rutgers, Roland. 1998. *Yamphu: Grammar, Texts and Lexicon*. Leiden: Research School CNWS.
- Schachter, Paul. 2007. "Parts-of-speech systems", in Shopen, Timothy (ed.) *Language typology and syntactic structure, Vol. 1 Clause structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-60.
- Toba, Sueyoshi. 1984. *Khaling* (2nd edition). Tokyo: ILCAA, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.
- Turin, Mark. 2012. *A Grammar of the Thangmi Language: with an ethnolinguistic introduction to the speakers and their culture*. Brill's Tibetan Studies Library, Languages of the Greater Himalayan Region, Volumes 5/ 6, Leiden & Boston: Brill
- Watters, D. 2009. *A grammar of Kham*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.