

The Semantics of Onomatopoeic Speech Act Verbs

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the semantics of onomatopoeic speech act verbs. Language abounds with small bits of utterances to show speaker's emotions, to maintain the flow of speech and to do some daily exchange routines. These tiny vocalizations have been regarded as vocal gestures and largely studied under the framework of 'interjection'. In this paper, the emphasis is placed on the perlocutionary force the vocal tokens contain. We describe their conventionalized lexical meaning and term them as onomatopoeic speech act verb. An onomatopoeic speech act verb refers to a syntactically independent monomorphemic utterance which performs illocutionary or perlocutionary forces. It is normally directed at the listener, which making the recipient to do something or to solicit recipient's response or reaction. They are onomatopoeic because most of them are imitation of the sounds produced by doing some actions.

1 Introduction

Based on the Speech Act Theory (Austin 1992; Reiss 1985; Searle 1969, 1975, 1979), speech act is what speaker performs when producing the utterance. Researchers suggest that speech act is not only an utterance act but contains the perlocutionary force. If the speaker has some particular intention when making the utterance such as committing to doing something or expressing attitude or emotions, the speech act is said to contain illocutionary force. On the other hand, if the utterance has a particular effect on the addressee, the utterance is regarded to contain perlocutionary force. In addition to the familiar speech act verbs, we suggest that speech act can also be carried out by a group of syntactically independent small vocalizations. Since they are imitations of sound generated by certain actions, we describe them as 'onomatopoeic speech act verb'. Example (1) illustrates this kind of verb:

- (1) ¹A: 欸！哥！ ||
ei ge
hey brother
B: 什麼事？ ||
sheme shi
what thing
A: 你看，那邊有個看相的。
ni kan nabian you ge kanxingde
you look there there_is CL² foutine-teller
A: Hey.

¹ Some of the examples used in this paper are extracted from *Academia Sinica Balanced Corpus of Modern Chinese*. Sinica Corpus consists of both written and spoken data. Please find Sinica Corpus at <http://www.sinica.edu.tw/SinicaCorpus/>

² Some conventions are used in this paper. PN= proper noun; FP= final particle; CL= classifier

B: What?

A: Look, there is a fortune teller there.

In example (1), speaker A uses 欸 (ei) 'hey' to attract B's attention. When B responds, A continues to say what s/he intends to say. As the example demonstrates, when A utters the word 欸 (ei) 'hey', s/he not only performs the utterance act but performs a perlocutionary act. This word will bring about effects on the audience, i.e. to make the audience pay attention to the speaker.

This paper attempts to explore the semantics of onomatopoeic speech act verbs. Language abounds with small bits of utterances to show speaker's emotions, to maintain the flow of speech and to do some daily exchange routines. These tiny vocalizations have been regarded as vocal gestures and largely studied under the framework of 'interjection'. In this paper, we describe a subset of interjection. We term these subset verbs as onomatopoeic speech act verbs. It refers to a syntactically independent monomorphemic utterance which performs perlocutionary forces. An onomatopoeic speech act verb normally brings about effects on listener by having the recipient to do something or to solicit recipient's response or reaction. They are onomatopoeic because most of them are imitation of the sounds produced by doing some actions.

The paper is organized in the following way. Section 1 is the introduction. Section 2 turns to review previous studies on interjection since onomatopoeic speech act verb is a subset of interjection. Definition as well as the classification on interjections will be brought up. Section 3 discusses the semantics of onomatopoeic speech act verbs and a selection of onomatopoeic speech act verbs is accounted for in details. Section 4 is the conclusion.

2 Interjections and its classification

Interjections have been extensively studied (Ameka 1992; Hill 1992; Wierzbicka 1991, 1992; Wilkins 1992). Previous researchers have generally regarded interjections as a separate class in that they can stand alone to constitute a complete utterance. On this account, the category 'interjection' is proposed to distinguish it from the other part of speech in the language system. Also, interjection is usually characterized as syntactically independent and as a small but encapsulated token for people to signify emotions, feelings or state of mind. By means of interjections, it is economic for people to express the simultaneous emotions of pain, joy, fear and the like.³

Interjection is a very broad category. In order to clarify the variety of interjections, scholars have made some classification on it.⁴ Classified by lexical structures, interjections can be non-words such as *sh*, or *psst*, can be real words in other word classes such as *yes* and can be phrases or expressions such as *dear me* and *God knows*. Interjections can also be grouped by the communicative functions they fulfil. Ameka (1992) makes a classification of interjections this way and renders three subtypes: expressive interjections, phatic interjections and conative interjections. Among the subtypes, conative interjections correspond to what we describe as onomatopoeic speech act verbs. In order to understand onomatopoeic speech act verb under the interjection framework, it is necessary to elaborate the subtypes.

³ Take a look at the definition proposed in Wilkins (1992): interjection is "a conventional lexical from which (commonly and) conventionally constitutes an utterance on its own, (typically) does not enter into construction with other word classes, is (usually) monomorphemic, and (generally) does not host inflectional or derivational morphemes" (p.124).

⁴ Generally speaking, the classification on interjections can be made with respect to their lexical structures and their functions. Considering the number of words the interjection has, Hill (1992) distinguishes one-word 'interjections' from 'interjectional expressions'. For example, expressions like *Goodness knows* and *bloody hell* are interjections expressions. In Ameka (1992), 'primary interjection' is proposed to be opposed to 'secondary interjection'. The former refers to those "tend to be phonologically and morphologically anomalous" (p105) and the latter tend to contain words in other word classes.

2.1 Expressive interjections

As the name indicates, expressive interjections are purely used to express people's emotions, feelings or state of mind. Some may name it 'emotive interjections'. This subtype exemplifies the typical interjections, i.e. 'primary interjections', which refers to little words or non-words which constitute an utterance by themselves and simply convey people's emotions. Also, they do not normally enter into construction with other word classes. See example (2):

- (2) A: 如果寄航空，十天左右就到了。 ||
 ruguoji hangkong shi-tian jiu dao le
 if mail airmail ten-day then arrive FP
B: 哎喲，郵費怎麼這麼貴啊？ ||
 aiyao youfei zeme name gui a
 gee fee why so expensive FP
A: If you send it by airmail, it takes only ten days to arrive.
B: Gee, why the mailing fee is so high?

Expressive interjections can convey disgust, surprise, pain etc. In Mandarin Chinese, examples of this type are 哎喲 (aiyao) 'gee', 哎呀 (aiya) 'ah' and 哇 (wa) 'wow'. Example (2) illustrates 哎喲 (aiyao) 'gee' in the conversation. It indicates speaker's surprise to find the mailing fee is much higher than s/he has thought. It is worth noting that 哎喲 (aiyao) 'gee' can show the speaker's reluctance, impatience and embarrassment as well.

2.2 Phatic interjections

Some interjections are used to meet the conversational goals and maintain the personal exchanges. This kind of vocal gestures "expresses a speaker's mental attitude towards the on-going discourse" (p114). Vocal okens like *mhm* or *yeah* are examples of this type.

As a matter of fact, phatic interjections have been fully studied under different frameworks. In previous studies, these vocal tokens have been variously termed as 'discourse markers' (Schiffirin 1994), 'reactive tokens' (Clancy et al. 1996) and 'discourse particles' (Fischer 2000). As Clancy et al. (1994) defines, they are "small bits of vocal behaviors which exhibits the understanding that an extended turn is in progress on the first speaker" (p.1). It indicates the second speaker's receipt, understanding or agreement to the previous utterance produced by the first speaker. By the phatic interjections, speakers make less effort to do the responding to the previous speakers and the previous utterance. See the following examples. Both 喔 (ou) 'oh' 嗯 (en) 'hmm' are employed to show receipt of as well as agreement to the previous utterance.

- (3) A: 我在家等你電話！ ||
 wo zaijia deng nide dianhua
 I at_home wait your phone_call
B: 喔，好好好。
 ou haohaohao
 oh O.K
A: I will be home waiting for your call.
B: **Oh**. O.K.

- (4) A: 你看，一點兒都不痛吧？ ||
 ni kan yidian dou bu tong ba
 you see little all not hurt FP
B: 嗯，只覺得涼涼的。 ||

en zhishi juede liangliangde
hmm only feel cool

A: You see, it doesn't hurt at all.

B: **hmm**, just feel a little bit cool.

2.3 Conative interjections

The use of the conative interjections may be to get the recipients' attention or to demand the recipients to responde. Therefore, conative interjections are not only passively used to express the speaker's mental state as the previous two are proposed to do, but the utterances are directed at the auditor. For example, in English *sh* is used to tell people to be quiet and *eh* to repeat what has been said or say something more.

Example (5) illustrates one of the conative interjections in Mandarin Chinese 噓 (*xu*). Equivalent and phonologically similar to English '*sh*', 噓 (*xu*) is used to tell people to be quiet, too.

(5) A: 像隻豬啦 ||

xiang zhi zhu la
like CL pig FP

B: 噓！林小姐你不要亂說話好不好？ ||

xu linxiaojie ni buyao luanshuo haobuhao
sh PN you not blabber alright

A: He is just like a pig.

B: Sh, Miss. Lin, don't say something like that, alright?

3. Onomatopoeic speech act verbs

Let's turn back to take a close look at the onomatopoeic speech act verbs. Since we describe the onomatopoeic speech act verb as a syntactically independent monomorphemic utterance which performs perlocutionary forces, it is feasible to say that onomatopoeic speech act verbs are a subset of interjections.

As a result, onomatopoeic speech act verbs include those which have been previously classified as interjection. As section 2 mentions, there are expressive, phatic and conative interjections. It is suggested that expressive and phatic interjections are primary interjections, which share more typical properties of interjections than conatives. On the contrary, conative interjection is a little different from the previous two and is more like what we have described as onomatopoeic speech act verb. Besides, onomatopoeic speech act verbs also include what Ameka (1992) calls 'illocutes', a term coined to cover various illocutionary linguistic items, including vocatives and routines.

Generally speaking, onomatopoeic speech act verb contains the following features. First, most importantly, onomatopoeic speech act verb carries perlocutionary forces. Second, onomatopoeic speech act verbs are standardized and grammaticalized to fit to the phonological system in the language. Third, onomatopoeic speech act verbs are onomatopoeic because they imitate the sounds produced by certain action or behaviour. In the following, a group of selection onomatopoeic speech act verbs are accounted.

3.1 Some onomatopoeic speech act verbs

3.1.1 嗨 (*hai*) 'hi' / 喂 (*wei*) 'hello'

This type of speech act verbs also comes into the category 'routine' or 'routine formula'. They are utterances produced by people to interact with others in everyday talk and meet the basic interactional needs, like greetings or farewells. Interlocutors normally intend to use the routine formulae to initiate an exchange or respond to each other in social and communication contact. Generally, the routine formulae

are sometimes accompanied by actions like waving hands. It is worth mentioning that routines frequently come in pairs. The token which initiates a conversation and exchange is usually corresponded by the same token by the second speaker, like *hello*, *goodbye* and so on. See example (6) and (7):

- (6) A: 爸爸！ ||
 baba
 dad
 B: 嗨！嗨！小玲啊，你回來啦！ ||
 hai hai xiaoling a ni huilai la
 hi hi PN FP you come_back FP
 A: Dad.
 B: **Hi. Hi.** Xiaoling, you're home.

- (7) A: 快講呀！長途的耶！ ||
 kuai jiang ya changtude ye
 quick speak FP distant FP
 B: 喂，阿面哦，我願意啦！喂？喂... ||
 wei, Amian o wo yuanyi la wei wei
 hello PN FP I willing FP hello hello
 A: Speak fast. It's a distance call.
 B: **Hello.** Amian. I will do that. **Hello...hello**

In example (6), speaker B, the father greets his daughter to come home by using the fixed expression 嗨 (hai) 'hi'. 喂 (wei) 'hello' with a rising tone illustrates a greeting, particularly used to initiate a telephone conversation. Furthermore, it is used in telephone conversation to make sure the person who is on the other side of the phone is still there. Example (7) illustrates both of the situations. The use of the first 喂 (wei) 'hello' is to initiate a telephone conversation. And the last two 喂 (wei) 'hello' are produced because speaker B probably senses that the line is disconnected and utters several 喂 (wei) 'hello' to make sure A is with him/her. When uttering 喂 (wei) 'hello', speaker B intends to ask for speaker A's response. In other words, speaker B demands speaker A to respond to him/her to show the presence.

3.1.2 喂 (wei) 'hey' / 噓 (xu) 'sh'

This type is what Ameka (1992) classifies as 'conative interjections' since the vocalizations are directed at the audience. Speakers do not actually say something to convey some information, but do an action to solicit the response or action from the recipient. 喂 (wei) 'hey', for instance, is a informal summoning to draw people's attention. Or we can call it 'attention getter'. 喂 (wei) 'hey' and 噓 (xu) 'sh' demonstrate this type.

- (7) A: 喂...妳到底覺得小裕人怎樣啦？
 wei ni daodi juede xiaoyu ren zeyang la
 hey you on_earth feel PN personality what FP
 A: hey, what on earth do you think about Xiaoyu?

- (8) A: 像隻豬啦 ||
 xiang zhi zhu la
 like CL pig FP
 B: 噓！林小姐你不要亂說話好不好？ ||

xu linxiaojie ni buyao luanshuo haobuhao
sh PN you not blabber alright

A: He is just like a pig.

B: Sh, Miss. Lin, don't say something like that, alright?

Unlike the usual way to address people, 喂 (wei) 'hey' as English *hey* is to address people in an informal way. It is often used between those who are close to each other. In example (7), speaker A uses 喂 (wei) to draw listener's attention and ask for his/her opinions about a particular person.

Speakers produce 噓 (xu) 'sh' in Mandarin Chinese to tell people to be quiet. In example (8), speaker B uses 噓 (xu) 'sh' extensively to stop speaker A from talking because speaker A says something inappropriate. Obviously, 噓 (xu) 'sh' is an onomatopoeic speech act verb and it has effects on people to stop them talking or making the noises.

3.1.3 呸 (pei)'bah' / 哼 (heng)'humph'

Among onomatopoeic speech act verbs, some word imitates the sounds of some actions which indicate the speaker's mental state or emotions. They are speech acts and turned out to be conventionalized iconic expression. Examples are 呸 (pei)'bah' and 哼 (heng)'humph'. 呸 (pei) 'bah' stands for the sound made by spitting. The action of spitting itself represents an action to show disdain, contempt, disgust and scorn. Thus, the imitation of the sound of spitting symbolizes the action of spitting and show the disgust and scorn. It is usually preceded or followed by negative comments or evaluation. In the example (9), speaker A thinks that it is easy to say something which is not true. However, she scorns such behaviour and shows her feelings by uttering 呸 (pei)'bah'.

(9) A: 我可以說我覺得他很帥，但是翻過臉去，呸！

wo keyi shuo wo juede ta hen shuai danshi fanguo lianqu pei
I may say I feel hevery handsome but turn face bah
算什麼呢？這些是謊話。
suansheme ne zhexie shi huangyan
what_is_this FP these are lies

A: It's no problem for me to say he is handsome. But I will turn my head and says 'bah'. What are these? They are all lies.

In a similar way, 哼 (heng)'humph' represents a sound produced by the flow through nasal cavity. It also imitates the sound of action which shows disgust and disdain for someone or something. In example (10), speaker A thinks the listener has a bias in favour of someone else rather than her/him when the listener mediates the fighting. Speaker A uses 哼 (heng)'humph' to show the feelings.

(10) A: 哼，反正每次我們吵嘴，你總是護著她。||

heng fazheng meici women caozui ni zongshi huzhe ta
humph anyway every_time we quarrel you always protect her

A: **Humph!** You are always on her side when we are fighting.

3.2 Characterization of onomatopoeic speech act verbs

Unlike typical interjections which do not enter the other category of the linguistic system, onomatopoeic speech act verbs can be used as a typical verb. Take 呸 (pei)'bah' and 哼 (heng)'humph' for example. It is mentioned in section 3.1.3 that 呸 (pei)'bah' is the imitation of the sound of spitting, which symbolizes the action of spitting and show the scorns. 哼 (heng)'humph' works in the same way to be employed to express the disdain. We may observe from example (9) and (10) that they appear

independently as an integrated utterance. However, they may appear as typical verbs as well. See the following examples:

(11) 惹得池邊洗衣的女人呸呸幾聲把頭轉開躲開。

rede chibian xi yifu de nuren peipei ji sheng ba tou ruankai
irritate pond_side wash clothes DE women bahbah several CL BA head turn_away
(It) pissed off the women washing clothes by the pond. They made several spitting sounds and turned their head away.

(12) 青青停住，在心中輕蔑地哼了一下。

Qingqing tingzhu zai xinzhong xingmiede heng le yixia
PN stop in mind scornful humph FP a_little
Qingqing stopped and humphed a little bit in her mind.

Actually, 哼 (heng) has more than one sense. 哼 (heng) is analyzed to have three senses⁵ which will be listed below. The first sense is illustrated in section 3.1.3.

Sense 1: 【I】 a short nasal soun, expressing scorn or contempt. [humph]

Sense 2: 【VC】 to make a short nasal sound, usually because of anger or pain. [grunt]

example: 刀入肌肉，他竟是哼也沒哼一聲。

dao ru jirou ta jingshi heng ye mei heng yisheng
knife into muscle he unexpectedly grunt also not humph one
“He got stabbed by the knife but unexpectedly he didn’t grunt at all.”

Sense 3: 【VC】 to sing without opening the mouth. [hum]

example: 媽媽一邊哼著歌，一邊洗碗。

mama yibian hengzhe ge yibian xiwan
mother while hum song while wash_dishes
“Mother is humming while she is washing the dishes.”

It is also worth nothing that the conventionalized written forms (i.e. a Chinese character) for interjections and onomatopoeic speech act verbs in Mandarin Chinese tend to have the radical 口 ‘mouth’. Such a written form suggests that the act is performed vocally. It is suggested by previous researchers that interjections tend to be phonologically anomalous. Therefore, the conventionalized written forms do not virtually reflect the sounds speakers actually produce them. As a result, this in turn leads to the phenomenon that multi-forms may stand for one single vocal token or one written form stands for more than one vocal token.

For example, one phatic interjection, equivalent to English ‘oh’, is used to indicate change-of-state of mind. Example (3) may illustrate its function. It is found two word forms for this particle in the Sinica Corpus 喔 and 噢; however, the former one with frequency 449 is much frequently used than the latter with frequency 50. On the other hand, written form 喂 may exemplify the cases in which one written form stands for more than one vocal token. This form is employed to stand for telephone greeting token pronounced as /wei/ with rising tone and attention getter as /wei/ with falling tone. This may refer back to section 3.1.1 and section 3.1.2.

⁵ For detailed analysis, see Huang (2003).

4. Conclusion

It has been observed that ample tiny vocalizations exist in the languages. They are considered to be vocal gestures and generally known as 'interjection'. This paper aims to describe a group of monomorphemic vocalizations to be onomatopoeic speech act verbs and explore their semantics. Even though resembling interjections in some way, onomatopoeic speech act verbs are those who perform perlocutionary force. They may be routine formulae to initiate an exchange or a conative token to demand a response or have people do something. They can be characterized as a syntactically independent monomorphemic utterance. In addition, it is normally directed at the listener. They are onomatopoeic because most of them are imitation of the sounds produced by doing some actions. In the present paper, onomatopoeic speech act verb is under discussion and illustrated. It is shown that there is a special group of one-word small onomatopoeic speech act verbs which perform perlocutionary forces.

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