'Wanjh! Bonj! Nja!': Sequential organization and social deixis in Mayali interjections

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This paper examines the semantics and pragmatics of a number of interjections in Mayali, a language of Arnhem Land, Australia. Definitions using Natural Semantic Metalanguage are used to make explicit the complex relations between the lexical meanings of interjections and their interpretation in context.

One class of interjections, which I call organizing interjections, play an important role in structuring discourse and in many cases constitute complete turns in conversational (and also in basically non-verbal) sequences. Their behaviour is explained by making explicit the presuppositions about discourse context, or 'discourse placedness conditions', that are part of their lexical meaning. Another two sets of interjections, the 'Gesundheit set' and the 'sorry-for-the-swearing set', exhibit highly specific presuppositions about social context, or 'social placedness conditions'.

Other interjections have a substantial degree of indirection, making inference necessary for their interpretation. To illustrate this the interjection *mah* 'time to do something!', whose agent is not semantically specified, is compared with others like *nja* 'you take this now!' whose agent is made explicit in the semantic representation. To cover cases like *mah* it is useful to introduce a distinction between *overt indirection*, the lack of formally explicit coding of some aspect of meaning (e.g. argument or complement ellipsis), and *covert indirection*, the absence of some aspect of meaning from the semantic representation itself. All interjections, on this definition, are overtly indirect, but only some (such as *mah*) are in addition covertly indirect.

1. Introduction

Mayali, a Gunwinjguan language of Western Arnhem Land, Australia, is an intensely polysynthetic language in which highly complex verbs are marked with a large number of obligatory categories (subject, object, tense/aspect/mood, voice), regularly incorporate nouns and gerundive verbs, and have a large number of further optional affixes used for quantification and more precise adverbial information. Two Mayali[1] sentences, typical in their degree of morphological complexity, are (1) and (2).

[1] Mayali is an Australian language belonging to the Gunwinjguan family and spoken in Western Arnhem Land. There are a number of subdialects, including Gun-djeihmi, Kunwinjku and Kune;

(1) Al-egebu daluk   a-ban-marne-yawoih-warrgah-ganj-ginje-ng.
    II-those   woman 1sg-3pl-BEN-again-wrong-meat-cook-PP
    'I cooked the wrong meat for those women again.'
(2) Barri-ganj-yi-lobm-i-durnd-i.
    3pl-meat-COM-run-GER-return-PP
    'They ran back with the meat.'
    (Lit. 'they-meat-with-running-returned')

The forbidding verb morphology of Mayali would appear to give little scope to be brief or routine, and perhaps in compensation the language has an extremely rich set of interjections. I define the prototypical interjection as a word that is (a) monomorphemic, (b) capable of making up an independent, non-elliptical utterance, and (c) not used to represent a non-speech sound. Condition (a) is to exclude what Ameka (1992) calls 'interjectional phrases'; an example of a would-be interjection excluded by this condition is the morphologically complex *gebnguneng* 'thank you', whose morphological structure is *∅-geb-ngu-neng* [I/you-nose-eat-PastPerfective], lit. 'I ate your nose'. Condition (b) is to exclude the various monomorphemic words – e.g. modal particles like *wardi* 'might', conjunctions like *dja* 'and', and so forth, as well as many nouns – which are syntactically integrated with other words in a clause, and either cannot occur alone (as with *wardi* and *dja*), or only do so in very specialized contexts, such as when an isolated noun is used for nomination, as in the utterance *daluk* 'a woman!'. Condition (c) is to exclude ideophones like *wurr* 'crash' and onomatopeic words like *djek-djek* 'call of the *bodjekdjek* bird' or *gurlulk* 'noise made by an emu'.

    Many of the Mayali interjections defined in this way fit readily into the

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classification proposed by Ameka (1992). There are 'emotive' interjections like *warddau* 'ow!' and *waaau* 'aargh!', 'cognitive' interjections like *gek* 'I say', 'I have just found out something interesting', and 'conative' interjections like *bauh* 'shh!', *njudj* 'below your nose!' and *tja* 'git! (to a dog or pig)'.

In this paper I will focus on another class which I shall call 'organizing interjections', which serve to organize the overall move structure of a discourse, but also of basically non-verbal interaction. Like Ameka's 'phatic' interjections, these help 'in the establishment and maintenance of communicative contact'. But their role goes well beyond merely backchannelling or signalling feedback, to indicating, or even constituting by themselves, more complex communicative moves such as offers, refusals, suggestions, initiations, terminations, apologies, and changes of discourse direction. Although their functions are comparable to those of 'discourse markers', which Schiffrin (1987: 31) defines as "sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk", I do not adopt that term here for two reasons. Firstly, 'discourse markers' are defined by function, not by form as is the case for interjections, and can have a range of formal possibilities which include interjections (e.g. 'oh') but also conjunctions ('and', 'but', 'because') and phrases ('I mean', 'y' know'). Secondly, the organizing role of the interjections I shall be discussing is broader than that of simply 'bracketing units of talk' – they may constitute such units in themselves, and they may also bracket units of non-verbal behaviour.

Organizing interjections play such a central role in the organization of Mayali conversation that it is possible to carry out certain sorts of conversation with little resort to the morphologically complex verbs so typical of its grammar. A sample conversation – developed by Eddy Hardy and myself for pedagogical purposes, but not unrepresentative of normal conversation – is given in (3). Interjections are in italics.

(3) A: *Boi!*
    Hey, come here!
    [Old woman to youth:] 'Hey, come here!' [Old woman holds up baby,]
   B: *Njonj-njonj!*   *Njudj!*   *Njonj-njonj!*
    What a little sweetheart! Blow your nose! What a little sweetheart!
    'Isn't she a little sweetheart! Blow your nose! Isn't she cute!'
   B: Gakkak, bakki   gan-wo-∅!
    granny   tobacco 2sg/1sg-give-IMP
    'Granny, give me a smoke!'
   A: *Nja!*   Gun-warde gan-wo-∅   ngayeman-wali!
    here.you.are IV-money 2sg/1sg-give-IMP 1sgEMPH-in.turn
    'Here you are. And YOU give ME some money!'
   B: *Gayakki!*
    have.nothing
    'I've got nothing.'

B: *Bonj!   Mah!*   Garri-re!
   enough let.it.happen.now 12pl-goNP
   'O.K. then. Come on, let's go!'
A: *Me:d!* A-madj-ma-ng   werrk.
   wait   1sg-swag-get-NP first
   'Wait on! I'll get my stuff first.'
B: *Ba!*
   hurry.up
   'Hurry up!?'
A: (Pause) *Ma!*
            O.K.to.act.now
   'O.K. (I'm ready so) we can go now.'
B: *Wanjh, bonj,*   garri-re.   *Bobo!*
   well   enough 12pl-goNP bye
   'Well, that's it, let's go! [To others remaining behind] See ya!'
A: *Bobo.*
   bye
   [Also going] 'See ya!'

As another illustration of the way organizing interjections can be strung together into a coherent discourse in Mayali, consider the following. An appropriate way to reluctantly accept a request (for some money, say, or an article on interjections), after a conversation in which the requestee put up some resistance to the requester's suggestion, could consist of a string of just three interjections: *wanjh! bonj! nja!*. The first, *wanjh*, signals a change in direction (here, from resistance to acquiescence); the second, *bonj*, signals completion of a phase of the conversation (something like 'enough said'); and the third, *nja*, means 'here you are / here it is'. The best English translation for this sequence is thus something like 'Well alright then, enough said, here it is!'

One aim of this paper is to show that the syntactic independence of these interjections is no impediment to their participation in higher levels of discourse structure. Like Wilkins (1992) I believe this can be accounted for by giving them a sufficiently enriched semantic characterization that the presuppositions they embody can be used to 'place' them in the right discourse context. I consider some examples of these organizational interjections in section 2.

In addition to presuppositions about discourse context, the meaning of interjections may include detailed presuppositions about social context, or 'social placedness conditions' (Evans in press). As an example of this I examine, in section 3, two sets of Mayali interjections – the 'Gesundheit set' and the 'sorry for the swearing' set – that manifest highly specific social deixis, in the form of presuppositions about the identities of, or kin relationships between, speaker, hearer and referent.

As well as including detailed presuppositions about context, another sense in which interjections are deictics is that they rely on context for their full interpretation, and a third aim of this paper is to elucidate the role of contextual information in the interpretations of interjections. Wilkins (1992) convincingly argues that various interjections in English, Italian, Arrernte and American Sign Language can be decomposed into full propositions, containing one or more arguments whose reference is realized by a process of deictic substitution. Wilkins' view of interjections as deictics is an important corrective to the view of interjections as semantically impoverished, and is a correct analysis of many Mayali interjections.

However, I believe it would be quite misleading to see all contextual contributions to the meaning of interjections as resulting from deictic substitution. More complex processes of inference are sometimes required, about the nature of the act being requested, who is being asked to carry it out, and so forth. In particular, there are many interjections in Mayali with a substantial degree of indirection. In section 4, I examine the interplay of indirection and inference in determining the interpretation of the interjection *mah*, compare it with the more explicit interjection *nja* 'here, you take this', and briefly discuss the problem of identifying indirection in interjections.

Throughout the paper I use Natural Semantic Metalanguage for my definitions of interjections. Other articles in this issue justify this approach (see e.g. the articles by Wilkins and Wierzbicka) and I shall not do so here – the reader is referred to Goddard (1989) for an overview.

2. Interjections and sequential organization

In this section I briefly outline the main organizing interjections in Mayali. The functional range of these interjections includes both

(a) the organization of discourse, where they are used to structure conversation, signal transitions from one topic to another, the completion of a topic, and so on.
(b) the more general organization of non-verbal activity, e.g. suggesting that activity take place, agreeing to this or signalling a delay, expressing one's readiness.

Some organizing interjections, such as *bonj* 'enough, finished', can carry out both-functions; others, like *med* 'hang on!' are only used to organize activity. I shall begin by illustrating the range of functions of *bonj*, and then pass to various interjections used to organize non-verbal activity. Note that at this stage I wish merely to show their organizing function in a preliminary way.

The important question of how context contributes to their full interpretation will be taken up in section 4.

The most important conversational organizers in Mayali are *bonj*, which signals the completion of one topic or organizational unit, and *wanjh*, which shows a new direction for the conversation and can also begin a new turn or a whole conversation. Each can work at a number of levels, signalling episodes within a story or turn, turns in a conversation, or boundaries to a whole activity, conversation or narrative. I shall confine myself here to discussing *bonj*.

An example of *bonj* signalling the completion of an episode within a single story is the following, from a telling of the Emu myth by Toby Gangele. Its occurrence in line (d) marks the completion of the pus-spattering episode, and is followed by a new episode in which Cuckoo-shrike, his sore now properly lanced, is able to walk:

(4) (a) Bi-mok-garu-i,   bi-nud-gorrhge-ng.
        3sg/3sg-sore-dig-PP 3sg/3sg-pus-burst-PP
        'Pigeon) dug in (Curlew's) sore, and he burst the pus out'.
    (b) Gun-nud ba-rrolga-ng an-ege.
        IV-pus   3sg-arise-PP III-that
        'All that pus rushed out.'
    (c) Gurlba gun-nud bi-rrelkge-ng   rouk, ragul.
        blood   IV-pus   3sg/3sg-spatter-PP all   red-eyed pigeon
        'Blood and pus spattered him all over, the red-eyed pigeon [hence his red eye-marks today].'
    (d) Bonj.
        finished
        'Alright.'
    (e) Ba-rrolkga-ng ba-bolk-melme-ng   ba-rrangi-nj gamak.
        3sg-get.up-PP 3sg-ground-tread-PP 3sg-stand-PP good
        '(Cuckoo-shrike) got up, tested his foot on the ground, put his weight on it, it was alright.'
    (f) An-gole   ba-me-i.
        III-bamboo.spear.shaft 3sg-get-PP
        'He got a bamboo spear shaft.'

An example of *bonj* signalling the end of a conversation, drawn from the same telling of the Emu myth, is the following. The various mythical characters, who are about to assume their eventual form as birds, are asking each other what species they will turn into. The end of the conversation is signalled in line (h) by a turn beginning with *bonj*, followed by an explicit suggestion that they each now go their own way:

(5) (a) Bedman   gu-barri-barnh-barndi
       3plEMPH LOC-3pl-REDUP-be.up.highPI
       'While the others were sitting in the tree, (they asked):'

  (b) 'Ngayed yi-yimerra-n?'
       how   2sg-turn.into-NP
       "What are you going to turn into?"

  (c) Gun-wok ba-rohrokme-ng, gawarre.
       IV-talk   3sg-try-PP   no.good
       'She (emu) tried to talk, but it was no good.'

  (d) Ba-rohrokme-ng ba-yime-ng gawarre, an-wid.
       3sg-try-PP   3sg-do-PP   no.good III-different
       'She tried (to speak) but it was no good, it was something else (than
       language).'

  (e) Ba-djal-yim-i galukborrk: 'gurlulk, gurlulk' ba-yime-ng.
       3sg-just-say-PI long.time   onom.   onom.   3sg-say-PP
       'She just kept saying for a long time: "gurlulk, gurlulk" she went.'[2]

  (f) 'An-ege yi-yimerra-nj.'
       III-that 2sg-turn.out-PP
       "That's how you turned out" (they said).

  (g) 'Ayed a-yimerra-ng?   Al-wanjdjuk a-yimerra-ng.'
       how   1sg-turn.out-NP II-emu   1sg-turn.out-NP
       "How am I going to turn out? I'll turn into an emu."

  (h) 'Bonj,   garri-bebbe-yarlarrme.'
       finished 12pl-each-separateNP
       "That's it then, we'll each go our own separate way."

  (i) Barri-dolkga-rr-inj rouk.
       3pl-get.up-RR-PP all
       'And they all got up.'

Bonj may also signal a speaker's renunciation of some activity. In (6), for
example, the malevolent *Daddubbe* spirit supplements an announcement that
he has stopped killing people with *bonj* between two clauses:

(6) (a) 'Ngaye Daddubbe, nga-bom   bininj nga-yakwo-ng,
       I   daddubbe 1sg/3sg-killPP person 1sg/3sg-finish-PP
       'I, Daddubbe, have finished killing people,'

  (b) bonj,
       finished
       'enough,'

  (c) nga-bunbom bolkgime.
       1sg-stopPP   now
       'I've stopped now.'

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[2] The verb *yime* can mean variously 'do, say, go (as in 'go bang')'; I have made use of both the
latter senses in my translation.

It is also typical to signal the end of a narrative with *bonj* or its derivative
djalbonj (*djal-* means 'only, just' so *djalbonj* means 'that's all, there's nothing
else'). For example, the narrative just given ends in the following way:

(7) Minj djama barri-yawoih-na-yi   gayakki,
    not not   3pl/3sg-again-see-IRR nothing
    gu-djal-mege   ba-bunbom,   an-ege gun-wok, bonj.
    LOC-just-there 3sg-stopPP   III-that IV-word   finished
    'And no-one ever saw (Daddubbe) again, he stopped (bothering people)
    then and there, that's the story, that's all.'

The uses of *bonj* discussed so far have involved discourse organization. But it
can also be used to organize activity more generally. It is frequently uttered to
show when a speaker judges an activity is complete, whether the activity is
carried out by the speaker or someone else. For example, one could say it to
indicate that one has finished a task (say, packing one's swag) or activity (e.g.
watching a video) and is ready to move on to another, or one could use it to
regulate someone else's activity, e.g. to signal that one has been given enough
of something.

   The interjection *bonj*, then, is used in an extremely general way to signal the
end of a unit of narrative, conversation, or of non-verbal activity. Its meaning
can be characterized as follows:

(8) *Bonj*   'Finished!'
    This event – I assume you will be able to know which – is finished now.
    I say 'bonj' so that people will know that what has been happening is
       over, and something else can happen now.[3]

We have seen that *bonj* can operate at a number of levels – within a story, for
example, it can mark the end of short episodes, or of the whole narrative, and
within a larger non-verbal interaction (e.g. helping someone change a tyre) it
may signal the completion of either a subevent (e.g. tightening a bolt) or of
the whole event (changing the tyre). *Wanjh* is likewise used in an extremely
general and flexible way, but to signal the beginning of new units rather than
their end.

   Both *bonj* and *wanjh*, then, can signal one's intentions with respect to the
organization of ongoing activity that may be monological, dialogic, or non-
verbal. Another set of particles is used primarily to regulate interpersonal
activity – to exhort or request permission for activity, and to signal resistance
or acquiescence to such interpersonal demands. Let us begin with *mah*, which

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[3]   I am endebted to David Wilkin for some aspects of this formulation. For discussion of the
similar Arrernte particle *kele*, see Wilkins (1989: 365–366).

can be translated roughly as 'let something (I assume people know what) happen now!'[4] In section 4 I discuss in more detail, under the rubric of indirection, the question of who is being incited to activity. For now I consider just the commonest case, in which the hearer is being requested to do something. A textual example illustrating the typically self-contained and context-bound nature of *mah* is the following extract from a description of the Morak initiation ceremony, told by Eddy Hardy. The one word *mah* is a sufficient command here because the participants, being seasoned initiators, know what needs to be done.

(9) (a) Galuk gobagohbanj barri-marne-yime-rr-eni:
       then   old.men   3pl-BEN-say-RR-PI
       'Then the old men would say to each other:'
  (b) 'Mah!'
       let.it.happen.now
       "Time to get on with it!"
  (c) Galuk danjbik dja bogen bani-lobm-i gunak-dorreng
       then   three   or two   3du-run-PI fire-with
       bani-wurlh-wurlhge-yi, dja barri-rungi yawurrinj.
       3du-REDUP-light-PI and 3pl-burnPI young.man
       'Then two or three would run around with a firestick and set fire (to the shelter holding the novices), and the young men would get burned.'

Mah is frequently used on its own, the nature of the request being clear from context, but it may also be followed by a more explicit request, e.g. *Mah, garrire!* 'Well, let's go!' or *Mah yibanmarneyolyolmen!* 'Well, tell them the story!'.

There are a number of interjections that can be used to respond to requests. *Ngoi* signals acquiescence to a suggested action: it can be used when the speaker himself will carry out a request (as in (10)), or in giving permission for the hearer to go ahead and do something (11). Note that the request may be explicit, as in (10), or merely implied, as in (11), which was the first turn after picking up some people who had been thumbing a lift by the side of the road.

(10) (a) Mah,   yi-wayini!
       let.it.happen.now 2sg-sing
       'Come on, sing that song!'
  (b) Ngoi, galuk nga-wayini.
       O.K. FUT 1sg-sing
       'O.K., I'll sing it.'

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[4] Two verbs are derived from this interjection: the inchoative form *mahme* 'get oneself ready', and the causative *mahge* 'get (someone) ready'.

(11) Ngoi, yi-bidbu-∅!
      O.K. 2sg-climb-IMP
      'O.K. then, climb up!'

Ngoi can be paraphrased, therefore, as something like

(12) *Ngoi*   'O.K.'
      I assume you want X to happen.
      I say: 'ngoi'
      By saying this I want to cause X to happen.

Two interjections that give notice of a delay in response are *med* 'hang on!
wait a bit!' and *bebba* 'a long way/time yet!' There are two differences
between the meanings of these interjections: firstly, *bebba* implies a longer
wait than *med*; secondly, *med* but not *bebba* implies that the completion of the
delaying activity is under the direct control of the speaker. A typical situation
in which *med* would be used, for example, is following a request like *garrire!*
'let's go', to which *med* is used as a replay with the sense 'hold on!'. Often it is
followed by a statement of what must be done first, e.g. *Med, amadjmang
werrk!* 'Wait on, I'll get my stuff first!'. *Bebba*, on the other hand, would be
more appropriate where the speaker is making a prediction based on knowl-
edge of external factors liable to delay completion of a task, e.g. in predicting
that roasting meat will not be ready for some time, or that the hearer will
have to travel further before finding enough firewood.

   I would thus characterize these two interjections in the following way:

(13) *med*   'Hang on!'
      I assume you want something to happen now.
      I say: I don't want it to happen now.
      I will do something else now;
      After that I will tell you when the thing you want to happen should
      happen.
(14) *bebba*   'It'll be a while/a long way yet!'
      I assume you want something to happen now.
      I say: (because of the way things are,) it will be a long time before it can
      happen.

Notice that a requested action can now take place is provided by the
interjection *ma*.[5] *Ma* can directly follow *mah*, giving a sense something like
the English sequence 'Come on then!' 'Righteo!'. It can occur in a sequence
like the following:

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[5] Phonetically this is [mah], with a significant aspiration after the vowel: this is the only
occurrence of this phone in the language. Orthographic *mah*, recall, is phonetically [ma?].

(15) A: Mah!   B: Med! [pause] Ma.
         time.to.act hang.on   O.K. now
    A: 'Come on!'   B: 'Hang on! [pause] O.K., now I'm ready.'

Ma may also follow a request that could not be acceded to until some (non-verbal) preliminary condition had been carried out. For example, if A asks the driver to stop the car so she can go to the toilet, the driver may first slow to a halt without saying anything, and then say *Ma!* 'Go ahead now!' In each of these cases, *ma* signals the speaker's readiness for some requested action to take place. It can be explicated as follows:

(16) *Ma*   'O.K. now.'
    I assume you have been wanting something to happen.
    I say: it can now happen.

The 'activity organizers' we have just been considering are all extremely general, in that they are applicable to basically any activity for which it makes sense to issue a request. In this they parallel the 'conversational organizers' *bonj* and *wanjh* which could be used at a number of levels of conversation with basically the same function, respectively signalling the completion and initiation of a conversational unit. This generality distinguishes them from conative interjections like *njudj* 'blow your nose!' or *tja* 'git!' which incite highly specific actions.

    To close this section, I would like to consider the status of the various interjectional sequences outlined above, and their relation to linguistic routines.

    Some sets of these interjections appear to display a sequential organization, in that some sequences are quite common, while others are rare or unattested. For example, it is common for *mah* to be followed by *med, bebba* or *ngoi*, but unusual for *ma* to be followed by *mah*.[6] One might argue that we are dealing here with some sort of higher-level organization, parallelling at the level of discourse the sequential organization of words within the sentence. This would be problematic for the view that interjections are only loosely integrated into the grammar.

    I would argue, however, that the appearance of a sequential organization for interjections is an epiphenomenon – it results from the more general sequential organization of human interactional activity, and it is the acts (of giving, receiving, requesting, acquiescing, etc.) that are organized sequentially,

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[6] Levinson (1983: 292) demonstrates the power of the assumption of relevance by providing specific contexts in which what appear to be totally unrelated utterances can form a coherent conversation. Similar demonstrations could be made with any pair of Mayali interjections. The sequence *Ma! Mah!*, for example, is highly unusual, but could occur in a situation where someone, having been notified they can now do something, discovers another necessary preliminary activity and exhorts someone to carry that out.

not the interjections themselves.[7] These latter simply acquire a semblance of sequential organization because their semantics associates them with particular sequentially-ordered acts. What distinguishes the Mayali situation from the systems of organization studied by conversational analysts is that more of the turn-types in Mayali have been routinized by the development of specific interjections.

The interjections considered in this section conform to Coulmas' definition (1981: 2–3) of conversational routines, which he defines as "highly conventionalized prepackaged expressions whose occurrence is tied to more or less standardized communication situations". This definition, it should be noted, neither requires nor precludes that the 'routine' be a one-word utterance. Since Ameka (1992) considers, but then rejects, the claim that interjections are a type of linguistic routine, it is worth seeing how well his arguments apply here. Firstly, Ameka argues, formulae but not interjections are 'intentional and (socially) expected reactions to situations'. But this description clearly holds for interjections like *mah, bonj*, or *nja*, which are intentional (in the sense of having an intended purpose) and highly predictable in given situations. Secondly, the meaning of at least some interjections (e.g. *nja*) contains an overt reference to the addressee, which Ameka suggests is characteristic of routines but not interjections. Thirdly, I show in section 3 that for two sets of Mayali interjections there are quite definite components referring to presuppositions about social setting; again, Ameka suggests conversational routines but not interjections should contain components referring to social setting. Thus each of the three criteria adduced by Ameka to distinguish interjections from linguistic routines does not apply for at least some Mayali interjections. In section 5 I return to what this implies about how interjections should be defined.

3. Interjections and social deixis

Social deixis is weakly manifested in many languages by the existence of a range of swear-words whose appropriateness depends on one's audience. Wilkins' (1992) definition of 'ow' builds in the factor of social appropriateness that contrasts it with, say, 'shit' or 'Christ!', by including the component '(I say "ow") because I know that this is how speakers of English can show (other speakers of English) that they are in pain (in a situation like the situation here)'. Another way of building this in would be to add a 'social placedness condition' (Evans in press) – a presupposition about the social relationship between speaker, addressee, and setting – along the lines of 'I assume that you are someone I can say "ow" to in this situation here'. Wilkins (1992) essentially

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[7] Cf. the statement by Labov and Fanshel (1977: 70) that "obligatory sequencing is not to be found between utterances but between the actions that are being performed".

adopts this approach in explicating the relevant component of Italian *to'*: 'I know I could not say this to everyone, but I assume I can say it to you because you are somone I say "[tu]" to'.

As Goffmann (1981: 97–98) and Wilkins (1992) have noted, the existence of such constraints on social appropriateness belies the view that all interjections are completely spontaneous, since some assessment of the social setting must be made before the appropriate interjection can be uttered. In Mayali there are two sets of interjections that contain particularly detailed social placedness conditions. The first is the set of 'Gesundheit' interjections, uttered when one of one's companions sneezes. Unlike such (secondary) interjections as 'Gesundheit' or 'bless you', which are basically insensitive to social setting, the Mayali equivalents encode specific assumptions about the identity of the interlocutor – in particular, his or her clan membership. Every Mayali speaker belongs to a clan or *gun-mogurrgurr*, with membership inherited patrilineally. In addition to specific clan names, such as *Badmardi* or *Djok*, each clan (of which there are twenty or so in the Kakadu region) has a special word known as a *yigurrumu*. For example, the *yigurrumu* of the *Badmardi* clan is *nadjala-minj*, and that of the *Mirarr* clan is *nabamgarrk*.[8] Traditionally, *yigurrumu* had a range of functions, including their use as ritual invocations and to ward off danger. Today, however, their only regular use (at least in the Kakadu area) is as a response to sneezing. Chaloupka (to appear) writes that the appropriate name 'is still used by the old people when somebody sneezes, so that the person's spirit, if ejected by the sneeze, would know where to return', and my own observation supports this. A semantic characterization of any of these *yigurrumu* words must contain, in addition to something like

(17) *Nadjalaminj*   'Bless you!'
    I hear that you have just sneezed.
    I say *nadjalaminj* because I want to make sure nothing bad happens to you because you have sneezed.

a component like

(18) I know you belong to clan X and one should say this word to people from that clan at times like this.

A second group of interjections with highly specific social deixis are a set of words that are appropriate as a response of sympathy or apology after someone has been sworn at. Swearing for the Mayali, as for many Aboriginal groups (cf. Thomson 1935 on various Cape York groups, and McConvell

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[8] Although the segment *na-* in these two interjections may, diachronically, be an old masculine noun class marker (which would require us to classify them as 'secondary interjections'), there is no synchronic reason to segment them.

1982 on Gurindji), is a somewhat ritualized activity with clear norms about who can swear at what kin, and the use of these interjections falls within the scope of norms about swearing.

A brief but typical exchange exemplifying the use of one of these interjections, *balmarded*, is (19). This was staged for me by a single informant, but is quite typical of what actually occurs.

(19) A: Yi-balk-beng!   Yi-nguk-gord-beng!   Yi-bid-dedj-dorreng!
        2-orifice-mind 2-guts-shit-mind   2-hand-crotch-with
        'You orifice-maniac! You shit-brain! You wanker!'
    B: Balmarded!
        Sorry.for.my.sibling
        'Don't get upset, brother!'

Note that *balmarded* may be used either by a third person, in which case the interjection offers sympathy, paraphrasable as something like 'I'm sorry to hear you sworn at like that, brother', or by the initial swearer himself, in which case it is used to apologise for one's own behaviour, much as the statement 'just a joke – don't be offended' might be used in English.

The choice of 'sorry for the swearing' interjection depends on the kinship relation of the speaker to the insultee. If, as in (19), the insultee is the speaker's brother or sister, the interjection *balmarded* is used. If the insultee is the speaker's wife (actual or classificatory), father, mother, uncle (*ngadjadj*), cross-cousin (*ganjok*) or mother's father (*mamamh*), the interjection *go* is employed. And if the insultee is the child, nephew/niece, son-in-law, mother-in-law, or parallel grandparent (*gagak* or *mawah*) of the speaker, the interjection *gabarani* is used. In the eastern dialect Kune there are two terms rather than three and the set of kin is divided up somewhat differently: *balmarded* is used with one's brother, uncle, nephew and niece; there is also a term *kurdih* which is used after one's father, child or son-in-law have been insulted.[9]

For the (Gun-djeihmi) interjection *balmarded* I propose the following semantic representation:

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[9]   In Gurindji (McConvell 1982: 98–99) there are four such distinct terms (which McConvell calls 'sympathetic expressions'). *Warri* or *warri-warri* is used when the victim of a joke is the speaker's father, child (of male ego), brother, sister, or father's father; *ngakuny* is used where the victim is mother's mother, mother's mother's brother, sister's daughter's child, daughter's child (female ego), wife, or wife's brother; *wangka* is used where the victim is the speaker's sister's child, child (female ego), mother's father, or mother's father's sister; and *m-m* or the gesture of sucking one's lower lip is used where the victim is the speaker's wife's mother or wife's mother's brother. On McConvell's description, the primary use of such interjections is to express sympathy where the swearer is a third person, and the use to apologize for one's own swearing is secondary – speakers can create the fiction that someone else has been doing the cursing, and are thereby enabled to use the sympathetic expression.

(20) *Balmarded*   'Sorry for my sibling!'
     I have just heard someone swearing at you.[10]
     One expects someone to do or feel bad things after something like this.
     I say *balmarded* because I do not want you to do or feel bad things
        because of that swearing
     I assume I should use this word because you and I have the same
        mother.

The component 'someone swearing at you' is deliberately vague enough to include both cases where a third person was the swearer, and cases where the speaker was the swearer, thus accounting for the use of *balmarded* as an apology after swearing at a sibling.

4. Indirection and the interjection *mah*

All Mayali verbs are explicitly marked for the person and number of their subjects and, if, applicable, their objects. There is never omission of such argument marking, even in imperatives or subordinate clauses. The grammar of Mayali thus makes it impossible for any utterance containing a verb to be 'indirect' in the sense of not overtly specifying its arguments.

Interjections, on the other hand, do not code the identity of their arguments overtly; to this extent they all make use of 'overt indirection', which I define roughly as 'the (pragmatically motivated) lack of formally explicit coding of some aspect of a clause's meaning'. In this section, I briefly investigate another question: Do interjections, overtly indirect as they all are, nonetheless differ in the degree to which they are 'covertly indirect' – that is, in the degree to which their semantics fails to include specific representation of some aspect of their meaning, such as the identity of any arguments of predicates in the semantic representation, or the precise nature of the predicates themselves?

Now the meaning of some Mayali interjections can be represented by complete propositions in which all referents are specified. An example is *nja*, which accompanies the act of giving, and which can be defined in a way parallel to Wilkins' definition of Mparntwe Arrernte *me!*, as

(21) *nja*   'You take this now!'
     I want you to take this thing I am holding out to you.
     I say '*nja!*' 'because I want to cause you to do it right now.
     I assume you will do it.

The identity of both subject and object, and the exact nature of the action

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[10]   Note that *balmarded* would not be used by the victim back to the swearer in an attempt to calm them down, unless the swearer had himself been sworn at.

being requested, are fully specified in this case once the appropriate deictic substitutions (of 'I', 'you', 'this' and 'now') have been carried out.

Other interjections, however, need to be characterized in a less explicit way; a good example is *mah* which I have glossed elsewhere as 'time to do something!'. This elliptical gloss is selected to represent the lack of explicitness of this interjection both with respect to who is supposed to carry out the action, and what action is supposed to be carried out.

Most commonly, of course, *mah* is used when the agent is intended to be the hearer. This is the case in an utterance like

(22) Mah,   yi-yarl-durrkma-∅!
      time.to.do.something 2sg-line-pull-IMP
      'Come on, it's time to pull your line in!'

In other cases, however, it is the speaker who is intended to be the agent – this is common in the use of *mah* to signal that one is ready to leave. While it could be argued that in this situation *mah* is really signalling that it is time for the addressee to give the speaker permission to leave, I do not believe this is a correct analysis, since such uses of *mah* need not be followed by such a permission – they simply signal the speaker's intention. In some cases there is deliberate vagueness about who should act, as in (9), which could lead to some subset of the addressees acting, or to the speaker acting, or to a group acting that includes both speaker and some hearers. There are also instances of *mah* being used with no obvious recipient of the directive. The Kunwinjku translation of Genesis (Anon. 1987), Chapter 1, Verse 1, Line 3 ('And God said, let there be light!'), for example, is

(23) Wanjh God ∅-yime-ng, 'Mah,
      well   3sg-say-PP time.to.do.something;
      ku-m-wolkayi-nda-∅!'
      3sg-hither-be.light-CONT-IMP
      Lit. 'And then God said, "Well time to do something, may it become light".'

In this case there is no obvious recipient of this suggestion.[11] I would therefore

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[11] Both the Russian interjection *porá* (V-INF) and the English expression '(It's) time to (V)' are similar to *mah* semantically. *Porá*, uttered in isolation, can suggest that it is time for the speaker, the hearer, or both, to do something that is given by context. Unlike *mah*, *porá* can double as a particle that is integrated into the syntax to the extent of optionally taking an infinitive, and/or a dative agent, e.g. *mne porá* 'time for me (to do something given by context)', *tebe porá* 'time for you (to do something)', *mne porá obedat'* 'time for me to dine', *porá obedat'* 'time to dine!' Unlike *mah*, however, it cannot be used alone in contexts where the inferred agent is third person, although it is compatible with an overt third person dative pronoun, e.g. *emu pora ujti* 'time for him to leave'. (I am grateful to Ilia Pejros for his judgments on these examples.)

claim that *mah*, unlike *nja*, places no restrictions on the identity of the agent, and that its meaning does not restrict the agent to first or second person.

In addition, *mah* is semantically vague in not specifying the nature of the action to be carried out. Here it contrasts with *nja*, which specifies that the action to be carried out is one of receiving from the speaker's hands. The full interpretation of *mah* in a given case, therefore, is not simply a matter of deictic substitution as it is with *nja*. Rather, processes of conversational inference must operate to decide on the nature of the act to be carried out, and on the identity of the agent. We can therefore represent the lexical meaning of *mah* as follows:

(24) *Mah*   'Time to do something!'
    I want someone to do something now.
    I assume that if you think about it you can know who it is that I want to
       do that something, and what it is that I want that person to do.
    I assume that if I say *mah* you will know that that person should do that
       something now.

The greater covert indirection of *mah* is predictable from the account of politeness developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), one of whose findings is that the amount of indirection is proportional to the 'cost' to the hearer, so that transactions which benefit the hearer (such as one in which something is given to the hearer, as in the case of *nja*) will be encoded in a more direct way, while those that 'cost' the hearer (such as a request for the hearer to do something, which *mah* occurs) will be encoded in a less direct way. On the other hand, the integration of interjections into this account raises problems of how to define indirection, which has been based on formal characteristics

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The English expression '(It's) time to (V)' (Wierzbicka 1988: 123–125) is also similar semantically, though not identical, to *mah*. To begin with, there are the obvious differences that it is a multi-word expression, and unlike *mah* (but like *porá*) can take a verbal complement. Like *mah* and porá it allows interpretations in which the agent is first person (e.g. 'well, time to get home then'), second person ('time to get to bed (kids)!') or some larger group including first person. But it does not allow an interpretation in which the agent is third person – for this interpretation we need to add an overt prepositional phrase, e.g. 'time for him to leave'.

Wierzbicka's discussion of 'it's time to' links the lack of third person agent interpretations to the semantics of interpersonal causation: 'if the utterance expresses someone's will, and expects to mobilize somebody to action, then it is clear that it can only mobilize the addressee or the speaker himself/herself, not somebody absent from the scene' (Wierzbicka 1988: 124). Similar arguments could be applied to Russian *porá*. It is also possible that *mah* has similar semantic constraints, and that the translation of Genesis given in (23) illustrates the rare case in which an omnipotent speaker *is* able to mobilize somebody or something absent from the scene.

In each case it is unnecessary to specify the identity of the agent in the representation of these expressions. They can be left open to inference, subject to the semantic constraints just given.

(e.g. ellipsis, no overt coding of particular arguments, explicit lowering of modality) rather than directly on semantic characteristics. It is to deal with this problem that I introduced the notion of 'covert indirection' above.

A comparison of *mah* and *nja*, then, indicates that interjections may vary in their degree of semantic specificity. Some, like *nja*, must be represented by a whole clause, in which the identity of subject and object, and the nature of the predicate, must be specified. Others, like *mah*, are semantically elliptical – the identity of the subject, and the nature of the predicate, are left open. In terms of their semantic difference, the distribution of indirection conforms to the predictions of politeness theory, since the more elliptical meaning is possessed by the interjection imposing the greater costs on the hearer. Unlike most types of utterance considered in discussions of politeness, however, there is no formal guide to the greater indirection of one interjection over another – formally, both are monosyllabic, monomorphemic, and syntactically independent. The differences only become apparent on comparison of the range of contexts permissible to each, and can best be brought out by an explicit paraphrase of the meaning of each interjection.

5. Conclusion

In this brief discussion of Mayali interjections I have taken the formal test of syntactic independence as the paramount criterion for defining the class of interjections. This leads to the inclusion as interjections of a set of words spanning a broad range of functions, not all of which are 'spontaneous immediate responses to situations' (Ameka 1992). The functions of some Mayali interjections, or sequences of interjections, are carried out by multi-word conversational routines or discourse markers in other languages. I do not believe this should be seen as a problem for the definition of interjections – it simply widens the set of attested mappings of function types onto a particular formal class.

As the examples included here demonstrate, the meaning of interjections may be quite complex, e.g. 'I say *nadjalaminj* because I want to make sure nothing bad happens to you when you sneeze'. Their meaning may include a dictum, e.g. 'I say: I don't want it to happen now' for *med*. In addition, their meanings may include information about illocutionary intent, and detailed presuppositions about social setting and about prior discourse and/or non-verbal interaction. There is also a wide range of variation in the degree of semantic specificity associated with interjections – some include highly specific presuppositions about social setting, extending to the identity of the addressee of the relation between speaker and addressee, while the meaning of others contains a good deal of indeterminacy. Building such placedness conditions into the meaning of organizing interjections accounts for observed interjec-

tional sequences by linking them, through their semantics, to particular act sequences.

On the other hand, interjections may also be semantically underdetermined and require processes of context-based inference to fill out their interpretation. Since their phonetic simplicity makes it impossible to link the variation in their semantic specificity to formal differences such as the ellipsis of particular arguments, we need to refine the notion of 'indirection' in a way that allows it to refer directly to the level of semantic representation, rather than simply to characteristics of surface form. I propose the term 'covert indirection' to cover such cases.

Interjections are problematic for the usual methods of linguistics because their scant form tells us so little. Under this laconic exterior, however, we discover many of the semantic complexities familiar to us from the study of formally more complex expressions. It is only by bringing this semantic complexity to light through a system of explicit paraphrase that we shall accord interjections the attention they deserve.

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