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“Ah, pox o’ your Pad-lock”: Interjections in the Old Bailey Corpus 1720–1913

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Abstract

In *Early Modern English Dialogs: Spoken Interaction as Writing* (2010), Jonathan Culpeper and Merja Kytö discuss the function and distribution of interjections such as *Ah*, *Oh*, and “pragmatic noise” such as *Tush* in Early Modern English, as represented in *A Corpus of English Dialogs 1560–1760*. Although they recognize trials as major sources of data close to speech, Culpeper and Kytö mention them only briefly in connection with interjections. I explore the use of the interjections *Oh*, *O*, *Ah*, *Ay(e)*, and *Ha(h)* in the Modern British English *Old Bailey Corpus* (1720–1913). As might be expected from trial records, the interjections are used with low frequency. Most appear in narratives by defendants and witnesses, but a few also occur in interactions among courtroom participants. After identifying the inventory of interjections used in the *Old Bailey Corpus*, I analyze their functions, and the extent to which they evidence change between Early Modern English, as described by Culpeper and Kytö, and Modern English as represented in the later parts of *The Old Bailey Corpus*. © 2015 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

In their study of represented spoken interaction in Early Modern English texts, Culpeper and Kytö (2010) devote four chapters to the function and distribution of “pragmatic noise”, including uses of *Oh* and *Ah* both as interjections introducing a clause and as stand-alone cries. Such expressions are “linguistic gestures which express a speaker’s mental state, action or attitude, or reaction to a situation” (Taavitsainen, 1995:439). Culpeper and Kytö’s data are primarily plays and personal correspondence, as represented in *A Corpus of English Dialogs 1560–1760* (CED, 2006). Although the authors recognize trials as major sources of data close to speech, they mention them only briefly in connection with pragmatic noise, largely to show that such forms are rarely attested.

In this short paper I explore the use of interjections in the Modern English corpus of trials known as *The Old Bailey Corpus, Spoken English in the 18th and 19th Centuries, extended version* (OBCext, 2012). OBCext is a data-base that evidences many features of spoken language (Huber, 2007). As might be expected from trial records, interjections appear with low frequency, and they are used with a more limited range of functions than in drama and correspondence. In particular, most are oriented toward dismay and invective, not endearment or appeasement.

2. Culpeper and Kytö’s analysis of interjections

Building on several studies, including Ameka’s (1992) synchronic study of interjections in Present Day English and Taavitsainen’s (1995) on Early Modern English interjections, Culpeper and Kytö (2010) distinguish:

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- a) Expressive interjections; these relate to the speaker and may be emotive (*Ah* expressing distress or sympathy) or discursively cognitive (*Ah*, *Ha* expressing surprise or recognition).
- b) Conative interjections that are directed at an addressee; they may be attention-getting (*Ho*, *Hey*), or seek corroboration (*Ha*).
- c) Phatic functions, e.g. maintaining the floor (*Uh-Huh*).

The majority of Culpeper and Kytö's examples are from drama and fiction, but a few derive from didactic works, witness depositions, and trials. In general the same set of expressions recurs, but with dramatically different frequencies. The dramas evidence the largest number of interjections (a total in CED of 1326). By contrast, there are a total of 88 interjections in witness depositions (narratives) and trials (questions and answers in court).

The top-ranked expressions of pragmatic noise appearing in witness depositions and trials in Culpeper and Kytö's data are: *Oh*, *O*, *Ah*, *Alas*, *Pho*, *Fie*, *Lo*, *Ay*, and *Tush* (p. 269). All these forms were found in OBCext except for *Lo* and *Tush*. In addition, I found some examples of *Ha*, and *Ho*.

3. Methodology

The *Old Bailey Corpus* appears in two forms: the full corpus (OBCext) and a subcorpus which is balanced according to decades. I used OBCext to maximize the number of possible interjections. For example, there are 906 instances of *Oh* in the *Old Bailey Corpus* and 1360 in OBCext. Comparison with the subcorpus showed that the functions of interjections do not differ between the two corpora.

Searches were run with the "whole words only" and "regular expressions" parameters for both capital and lower case *Oh*, *Ah*, *Ay/Aye*, *Ha/Hah* and for capital *O*. Hits were checked manually to verify whether they were examples of interjections or not. Interjections were identified by paraphrase (either same use in Present Day English or an alternative, e.g., can *Ay* can be paraphrased by *Oh*, *O*, or *Ha*?). Manual check of all examples revealed that in some cases the total number of hits and interjections is the same (*Oh*), but in others very different. In the case of *Ha(h)*, for example, there are 120 hits of which 101 are clitic *have*, the first syllable of *ha'penny* (*halfpenny*), or some other form.

Culpeper and Kytö provide numbers normalized per 1000 words as well as raw numbers. Only raw numbers are given here because normalization would not be meaningful for OBCext, given the small numbers of interjections, excepting *Oh*, the different lengths of the trials, the mix of allegedly verbatim transcription of speech and report on the background and outcome of the trials.

Here I discuss only those examples of pragmatic noise for which there are 20 examples or more: *Oh* (1360), *O* (330), *Ah* (51), *Ay(e)* (23), and *Ha(h)* (22). Reduplicated expressions were counted individually, as in Culpeper and Kytö (2010).

4. Uses of the interjections

In what follows I focus on interjections proper, which introduce a clause, rather than pragmatic noise (representation of stand-alone cries or laughter). Pragmatic noise is usually repeated, as in:

- (1) as if her Breath was almost gone, she cry'd, **Oh! Oh ! Oh!** - I thought the Blows were more like beating an Ox than a Christian! (t17320114-9)

Unlike interjections proper, pragmatic noise is usually not construable as part of the following utterance, i.e. it does not express stance toward the utterance or interlocutor, only to the situation.

Among vocative expressions, I distinguish those in which the interjection is followed by a name or title, e.g. *O Robin!* (t17320114-9), from invectives, e.g. *Oh you brazenfac'd Hussies* (t17430223-2), in which the interjection is followed by a personal pronoun, usually an adjective, and a title or vocative noun. Culpeper and Kytö (2010:279) find that adjectives in vocative expressions are largely semantically positive (*dear*, *sweet*), but are occasionally used with self-reflexive negative evaluation (*O monstrous man*). However, in OBCext, with the exception of *dear* (*Oh! my dear father* (t17670115-24)) the adjective is associated with negative semantics (*dirty*, *naughty*, *treacherous*, *wicked*, *vile*) or is used in a context where it is clearly intended as an insult (*Oh, you Bold Face, you have got my Dish* (t17430413-6)).

4.1. *Oh*

Culpeper and Kytö (p. 238–243) find that in their data *Oh* is used with:

- a) an emotive expressive function related to distress, extreme exasperation or directed anger,
- b) a cognitive expressive function related to surprise or sudden realization,

- c) a discursual cognitive expressive function as a preface to an answer,
- d) a phatic social function such as politeness (cf. *Oh thank you, Oh sorry*).

These four functions are attested in OBCext but there are few examples of phatic function (d).

Examples of (a), emotive function, include emotional distress or directed anger. Anger predominates, so many uses are insults or invectives (**Oh you strumpet** (t1745911-40)). In (2) a rare expression of sympathy is followed by a reported expression of personal emotional distress:

- (2) he came more like a man delirious, than a man in his senses, with great reflections upon himself for his past conduct, wishing the ground might open and take him in - **Oh! that dear good woman** - The best of women - She whom he had scourged - **Oh!** that he might be in her place. (t17551204-37)

Function (b), is found in use of *Oh* to introduce expressions ranging from acknowledgment of a person, statement or act to (alleged) sudden recognition of a person or situation. In most cases, the expression is emotionally relatively neutral.

- (3) a. Then I said . . . we suspect the body is poisoned. **Oh!** Sir, said she, if that be the case, by all means the body shall be opened. (t17620526-18)
- b. when the Door was opened he stepped just within the Threshold; **Oh,** says he, there's a Spinning-Wheel. (t17431012-15)

The discursual function (c) is typically a response to a question (e.g. *Oh yes/no. . .*). It may include a polite (phatic) formula.

- (4) **Oh,** I ask pardon, I did see one child, that I forgot. (t17870110-6)

4.2. O

Culpeper and Kytö argue that that *O* and *Oh* should be distinguished although they are used in mostly similar ways. The chief difference they identify is that *O* is favored with vocatives, and is usually written without a comma (p. 277–278). The punctuation suggests to them that *O* was becoming less independent, less like an interjection (which usually is followed by a comma), and increasingly part of a relatively fixed formula (p. 278).

Of the 330 examples of *O* in OBCext, 74 are of *O Lord* (one with a comma, *O, Lord*, and one with an exclamation mark, *O! Lord*). In addition there are 2 instances of *O Lor'* and 1 of *O law*, totaling 76 examples. By contrast in the 1360 examples of *Oh*, there are only 14 of *Oh Lord* (2 with commas, and one expanded as *Oh Lord God*). It appears that *O Lord* was the favored fixed phrase until the 1850s. After that there are no examples, but *O God* appears as late as 1902 (10 examples in total). From 1860 on the only examples of *O* are in vocative expressions invoking the deity. Another difference is that in OBCext *Oh* is favored with *yes* and *no*: there are 61 *Oh yes*, 90 *Oh, yes* but only 11 *O yes* and 5 *O, yes*. I therefore maintain the distinction between *Oh* and *O*, although what, if any, the phonological difference was is unclear.

When not used in vocative expressions, *O* usually has a cognitive expressive function. It is used in reporting (alleged) sudden recognition of a person or situation (5a), often also expressing distress, as in (5b):

- (5) a. Somebody knock'd at the Door. **O,** says she, 'tis my Sister Molly. (t17251208-54)
- b. Then something fell down stairs, and my Master cry 'd, **O!** what have I done? What have I done? (t17320223-41)

The speaker of (5a) actually pretended recognition: she claimed to her male visitor that it was her sister at the door when in fact it was her husband.

4.3. Ah

Culpeper and Kytö (2010:225–230) cite several prior analyses of *Ah* in Present Day English, in particular Ameka's (1992) observation that *Ah* has an emotive expressive function. They say more specifically that in CED it is used to signal:

- a) the speaker's own emotional distress (often in amorous situations),
- b) sympathy and pity for others' emotional distress,
- c) surprise, sudden insight, recognition,
- d) correction or disagreement with the prior proposition.

In CED *Ah* is not associated with relatively neutral contexts nor with appreciative, positive emotions such as Aijmer (1987) finds in Present Day English.

17 of the 51 examples of *Ah* in OBCext precede vocative expressions, addressing a particular person (*Billy, Mr. Gadsby*), sometimes generically (*youngman*). There is one *Ah my Lord*, in answer to a judge's question, but no formulaic *Ah Lord* to the deity.

Most examples provide clear evidence for "emotional affect" and for the functions identified in Culpeper and Kytö, except for (b), sympathy for others. Function (a), emotional distress, is illustrated by a beggar represented as asking for money with *Ah Country-man, give us a dram* (t17470604-8). In the following exchange a defendant had admitted that she fraudulently wrote a certificate of marriage for a woman and begs the court for understanding.

- (6) Court. And did you do so wickedly?
Hodgkins. **Ah**, my Lord! If you had but heard how she beg'd and pray'd and cry'd, I am sure you would have had some Compassion for the poor Creature. (t17330510-24)

Function (c), surprise, sudden insight, is illustrated by (7), in which the witness represents himself as finding Dick hard to recognize:

- (7) down he came, and in a sad smutty Condition he was. **Ah**, Dick! says I, is it you! (t17370420-43)

Function (d) is illustrated by discourses designed to project a reasoned rejection of a prior statement, as in:

- (8) Prisoner. Did not you swear before the Justice that you had this Butter from a Carman?
Lightfoot. Yes, I did so. But **ah!** you threatened my Life if I swore it against you. (t17320223-14)

Up to the 1840s *Ah* is distinctly associated with negative semantics, as it is in Culpeper and Kytö's CED data. Evidence comes most especially from examples with function (d) and use in invectives, e.g. (*Ah ye London fools* (17460702-15)), and:

- (9) the Prisoner's Wife said to me **Ah**, pox o' your Pad-lock! the Money's all gone. (t17350522-1)

However, during the nineteenth century more neutral examples appear. By 1845 *Ah* is being used as a marker of recognition, perhaps meant to convey warmth or empathy, as in *Ah, Mr. Ward, how do you do?* (t18451215-215) and:

- (10) when I got in Madame Denis said, "**Ah!** you are arrived, there you are; have you passed a good voyage, or did you suffer much of sea sickness?" (t18540403-531)

The last use in an invective is dated 1836.

In sum, *Ah* appears to be used primarily with cognitive negative expressive function in the earlier trials, but mostly with neutral pragmatics from the mid-nineteenth century on. *Ah* is often used with vocatives and is more like *Oh* than *O* in this regard since the vocatives do not invoke the deity and are not formulaic.

An interesting fairly late deposition may help highlight differences between *Oh* and *Ah*. The background is that Mr. Desvignes was steering a launch that crashed into a river boat killing one of the passengers. A witness testifies that the lock-keeper said:

- (11) "**Ah**, Mr. Desvignes, I told you what would happen." (t18801123-35)

In his own deposition, the lock-keeper says:

- (12) when I first saw Mr. Desvignes . . . I said to him "**Oh**, Mr. Desvignes, how did this happen?"—I did not say "**Ah**, Mr. Desvignes, I told you this would happen"—I am quite sure of that; nor "I told you what would happen;" nothing of the kind—I remember using the expression that it was a singular thing that it was only this afternoon that . . . (Ibid.)

The lockkeeper focuses on the modality of what he said (question rather than statement), and whether he had said it before. But it is noticeable that what he claims to have said is prefaced by *Oh* and what he denies saying is prefaced by *Ah*, perhaps because *Ah* would have implied more emotional engagement.

4.4. Ay/Aye

Culpeper and Kytö find that *Ay* is sometimes “ambiguous with affirmative *AY* . . . a different word”, meaning ‘yes’ (p. 230). This is also true of OBCext, so I combined *Ay* and *Aye* in my search. They do not appear to be differentiated as interjections. Of the 23 examples of *Ay(e)* in OBCext, 4 are ambiguous with ‘yes’ (e.g. (14) below).

Ay(e) used as an interjection signals emotional distress. In 10 cases, *Ay(e)* introduces an invective (13a) or an alert (13b):

- (13) a. Johnson seized me with one Hand, and with the other Hand, he felt in his Pocket for his Knife, and cry'd, **Aye**, G - d d - n you, you Dog, I'll kill you too. (t17370224-2)
b. I heard some-body cry, **Aye** Boy! I can't tell who it was. . . I heard a Man call Watch! and the Watchman cryed, **Aye** Boy! What's the matter now? (t17420115-25)

Recognition of a situation and cognitive dismay both appear to be conveyed by (14):

- (14) and the Prisoner said, I am afraid my dear Creature is dead. - Dead! **Ay**, says I, he's murder'd. (t17250630-6)

The functions of *Ay(e)* that Culpeper and Kytö find most in their data are expressions of sorrow (e.g. *Ay me*), and surprise at seeing something. They note (p. 230) that *Ah* has similar functions. This might suggest that *Ay(e)* and *Ah* are closely related. However, in OBCext, *Ay(e)* seems less emotionally charged and more closely related to *Oh*.

4.5. Ha/Hah

In their discussion of *Ha*, Culpeper and Kytö (2010:232) mention Taavitsainen's (1995) observation that *Ha* often co-occurs with *Ah*, and expresses insight. In their data, many examples are associated with questions and seek corroboration or demand an answer. Others signal surprise (e.g. *Ha! I hear Somebody coming*) (p. 235). *Ha* is therefore primarily used as a cognitive expressive marker in CED. It is also used to represent laughter, sometimes sardonic (p. 238).

In OBCext only one of the 23 examples of *Ha(h)* is associated with a question. Unlike many of Culpeper and Kytö's examples, it is not punctuated as a clause-final part of the question:

- (15) Ryan. What is the meaning that you can swear to one, and not to another? - **Hah!** How many of us were in Company? (t17370114-14)

In OBCext, *Ha* as an interjection is mostly associated with invectives and recognition of a situation discomfiting to the subject, typically violent thought or action:

- (16) a. He was brought in soon after by the Comfortable and Watch, and looking upon his Wife, **Ha!** says he, she is not dead yet. (t17250407-9)
b. I heard my servant, Sarah Taylor, cry out in a violent manner, **Ha** Master! and afterwards Thief. (t17450530-28)

Several examples are reduplicated, representing pragmatic noise: cries (17a), and insulting laughter (17b):

- (17) a. there was the deceased gasping for life, crying, **Ha, Ha, Ha!** he was close by them. (t17650918-56)
b. I heard them laugh, and make a noise.
What sort of noise? - **Ha! ha! ha!**
A sort of insulting laugh? - Yes. (t17861215-1)

In sum, *Ha(h)* is associated in OBCext with alarm, violence, and insult.

5. Conclusion

The most frequently used interjections in CED are also those that occur most frequently in OBCext. While the same types of functions are found in both corpora, their frequency of occurrence is register dependent. In OBCext endearment and politeness are rarely attested, and amorousness not at all. Largely they occur in narratives that form part of depictions but occasionally they are used among interlocutors in the courtroom, as illustrated by (4), (6), (8), and (15).

Of the interjections discussed here, only *Oh*, *O*, and *Ah* are found in twentieth century trials in OBCext. To the extent that the trials potentially provide evidence for linguistic change, increased neutrality is evident, most especially in the development of *Ah*. Strikingly, the last uses of *Ha(h)* as an interjection appear in the 1780s. This is an interjection that Biber et al. (1999:1097) list as the third most frequent in Present Day English after *Ah* and *Ooh*, so it may be that the absence of *Ha* in OBCext after the mid-eighteenth century is a function of courtroom reporting. To what extent use of interjections reflects changes in courtroom reporting generally rather than linguistic change remains to be investigated.

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