MIGHT INTERJECTIONS ENCODE CONCEPTS?
MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

Abstract:
This paper reflects on the conceptual nature of interjections. Although there are convincing reasons to claim that interjections do not encode concepts, arguments can be adduced to question such claim. In fact, some pragmatists have contended that they may be conceptual elements. After reviewing both the non-conceptualist and conceptualist approaches to interjections, this paper discusses some reasons that can be given to reconsider the conceptuality of interjections. Nevertheless, it adopts an intermediate standpoint by arguing that the heterogeneity of interjections, with items incorporated from other lexical categories, and the openness of the word class they constitute, which results in the coinage of certain interjections or the innovative usage of some elements, could indicate the existence of a continuum of more and less conceptual items. In any case, this paper suggests that those items with conceptual content would not encode full concepts, but some schematic material requiring subsequent pragmatic adjustments.

Keywords:
Interjections, conceptual meaning, procedural meaning, pro-concepts, relevance theory.

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1. Introduction

In spite of the marginal place many linguists have given to interjections, owing to their phonological, morphological and syntactic anomalies (Quirk et al. 1985; Ameka 1992a, 2006; Cueto Vallverdú and López Bobo 2003; Buridant 2006; Kleiber 2006; Świątkowska 2006), over the history of linguistics interjections have been accompanied by much speculation and polemics about their semantic content. Most linguists have regarded them as elements without a semantic content and given several reasons to prove this. In pragmatics, the relevance-theoretic analysis of interjections proposed by Wharton (2000, 2001, 2003) has adhered and supported their non-conceptual description and, therefore, reinterpreted their semantics in procedural terms. Other linguists, on the contrary, have defended that interjections must have some conceptual content (Wierzbicka 1991, 1992; Wilkins 1992 1995).

This paper does not aim to offer a definitive answer to the question of whether or not interjections really encode some conceptual content. Rather, on the basis of some arguments that can be adduced to preserve the assumption that they might be conceptual elements, it suggests that interjections may move along a continuum including some more conceptual items, other less conceptual items and items that do not encode any conceptual content at all. Those more conceptual items, however, would not encode full concepts –if there really are lexical items that encode them (Sperber and Wilson 1997)– but some very schematic notion that needs subsequent contextual fleshing out. In addition to hypothesising the existence of such continuum, this paper also argues that there may be a certain degree of variation among speakers of a language as regards their conceptual mappings onto interjections, so that there would be speakers for whom some interjections may be unequivocally associated with some specific concepts and others for whom the same interjections may be linked to different concepts or no concepts at all. Such variation may also occur across time, as there might be interjections that arise in a language without any conceptual load, but progressively acquire and even modify it.
This paper starts with a section that reviews the extant non-conceptual analyses of interjections, stemming mainly from some semanticists and semioticians. These emphasise the peculiarities of interjections, but make it clear that their heterogeneity prevents us from making generalisations over them. Its third section addresses the conceptualist approach to interjections suggested by some pragmatists, who claim that interjections must have some conceptual concept, even if vague or general. Then, this paper addresses the procedural shift in the analysis of interjections, which originated as a reaction to the conceptualist approach, and rejects the claim that interjections encode concepts. Finally, the last section of this paper reflects on some reasons that can be given to preserve the assumption that interjections are conceptual elements, discusses the type of conceptual content they might encode and whether all interjections might encode it.

For the sake of simplicity, the interjections considered here will be primary signals referring to “[…] the official business, or topics, of the discourse […]” (Clark and Fox Tree 2002: 78) –i.e. those used in overt, intentional communication– as opposed to collateral signals, which refer to the speaker’s verbal performance. Furthermore, the argument put forward will be developed taking into account only two broad categories of interjections: emotive or expressive interjections, which are those expressing feelings and emotions, and conative or volitive interjections, which are those functioning as orders (Wierzbicka 1992, 1992; Ameka 1992a, 2006). Other subtypes of interjections have been distinguished in the literature (e.g. Alcaide Lara 1996). If the proposal made in this paper is right, its applicability to account for those subtypes should then be tested.

2. Non-conceptualist analyses of interjections

For many authors it is clear that interjections do not encode concepts as nouns, verbs or adjectives do. Interjections can and do refer to something related to the speaker or to the external world, but their referential process is not the same as that of lexical items belonging to the grammatical categories mentioned, for the referent of interjections is difficult to pin down. In fact, on many occasions interjectional utterances are so indeterminate that the outcome of their interpretation can be a whole proposition, although there is not a one-for-one correspondence between the interjection and what the hearer recovers because no phrasal constituents can be distinguished in interjectional utterances. Thus, in a context in which an individual has accidentally hit his finger with a hammer and shouts (1), the hearer may interpret this interjection as communicating any of the propositions in (2):

(1) Ouch!
Regarding the nature of interjections as signs, their indeterminacy and openness, which may lead hearers to recover a wide array of propositions, have made semanticists and semioticians regard them as special types of linguistic signs. Nouns, adjectives or verbs can be defined in a more or less precise way by means of paraphrases or by resorting to synonyms. However, it is almost impossible to find appropriate contextual synonyms for many interjections or to paraphrase them. Although we could probably say that oh is a shriek we emit when we feel pain, and that oh and ouch are related expressions that fulfil the same function and are, in a certain sense, synonymous, it would be rather difficult to say what Oh my God, oh dear, damn, fuck and many other interjections mean. Even if the speaker had a very precise informative intention – if she actually had it at all – the hearer has to resort to inference in order to interpret interjunctonal utterances, and the result of his deductions may significantly differ from the speaker’s actual informative intention. The meaning of these and many other interjections is inextricably related to the context in which they are produced. If it may be difficult to assign a particular meaning to some interjections when they are intentionally produced in overt communication, this difficulty significantly increases when it comes to assign meaning to those interjections that arise spontaneously or unpremeditatedly, as impulsive reactions to certain stimuli, and the hearer is not at all aware of some contextual factors affecting their production. For these reasons, semanticists and semioticians have denied interjections the status of symbols (Kleiber 2006: 21-22; Świtkowska 2000, 2006).

Since interjections highly depend on what the speaker wants to express or communicate in the very situation in which they are used, their meaning would be non-natural and occasional (Grice 1957). It is not linguistically encoded and cannot be decomposed in identifiable discrete elements. Suffice it to remember that in many interjections we cannot trace a phrasal and, not the least, a clausal or sentential structure. Apparently, neither in (1) above nor in (3) below there is anything that makes these interjections be automatically interpreted as the propositions in (2) above or (4) below. Indeed, a hearer may obtain radically opposed meanings from the same interjection, as can be seen, for example, in (4d) and (4e):

(2)  a. It hurts!
    b. It hurts a lot/so much!
    c. My finger aches!
    d. My finger aches a lot/so much!
    e. I feel pain in my finger!
    f. I feel a rather intense pain in my finger!

(3)  Oh my God!
a. The boy is about to fall down! [said in a context in which a toddler has just slipped on the floor]
b. I am surprised that the police never called Peter. [said in a context in which Peter committed a crime and was never called by the police]
c. I regret what Peter told you. [said in a context in which Peter has said something offensive to the hearer]
d. It aches a lot! [said after having got one’s finger bitten]
e. I like it so much! [said when seeing a gift]

On the other hand, interjections have also been considered indexical signs because they evoke in the hearer’s mind a special content related to the feeling or emotion the speaker experiences when resorting to them. Many of them can actually be taken to be symptomatic signals because they are verbalisations which, in a sense, and to a certain extent, portray the speaker’s internal state (Nicoloff 1990: 214-221; Rosier 2000: 22; Schourup 2001: 1045; Kleiber 2006: 15; Świątkowska 2006: 50). This is clearly what happens with many expressive interjections: they, so to say, depict or portray the speaker’s feeling or emotion. However, they do not do so by means of average linguistic signs, but by suggesting or by providing hints to the hearer of what such feeling or emotion may be. For this reason, such interjections are connotative (Cueto Vallverdú 2003: 20; Ajmer 2004: 102; Kleiber 2006: 11-16). They seem to work as verbal orientating gestures that draw and direct the hearer’s attention towards some aspects of the extralinguistic reality, which become the necessary coordinates to interpret them (López Bobo and Cueto Vallverdú 2003). Such function is probably fulfilled thanks to their suggestive power, which relies on a certain ability to resemble some cultural gestures. Thus, as Schourup (2001: 1047) exemplifies, the phonological structure of an interjection such as yuk would resemble a stereotypical gesture we do when expelling something distasteful or repulsive from our mouth. Nevertheless, although there may be interjections that certainly resemble some of our reactions to certain stimuli and be associated with a feeling or state motivating such reactions, other interjections cannot be said to resemble the reactions caused by particular emotions or feelings. Although interjections resembled our reactions, such resemblance might be a resemblance of just a group of speakers’ typical reactions.

This notwithstanding, it is not always possible to generalise over interjections, as they form a rather heterogeneous word class. There are interjections that are relatively stable in the inventory of a language and are used in practically the same sort of conventional contexts. It is relatively easy to imagine contexts where hurra, sorry, ok, shit or thanks would be used and, if asked about their meanings or senses, speakers may probably agree that these interjections have some sort of core meaning and are used in the same kind of circumstances. The semantics of these interjections would be stable and become, to a certain extent, transparent to many speakers. Some of these interjections, moreover, are derived from other
words or lexical categories. This is the case of thanks, shit, hell or bloody hell, which are secondary interjections. Since they are originated in other lexical categories such as nouns or verbs, which do indeed have a semantic content, these interjections may preserve part of the initial conceptual content that the words that originated them had or, at least, some conceptual content related to it as a result of metaphorical or metonymic processes. Consequently, those interjections that have a relatively fixed meaning and usage would be close to the category of symbols and would contribute some sort of symbolic content.

On the other hand, those interjections that behave as symptoms of the speaker’s emotions or feelings would be closer to the category of indexes. At first sight, interjections such as yuk, eh, oh, ow or ouch do not seem to encode a concept, but to be suggestive of what the speaker feels at a particular moment. Yet, on many occasions those interjections seem to behave in a way that very much resembles symbols, for they cannot be easily replaced in some contexts by other interjections whatsoever (Schourup 2001). Thus, if an individual willing to know how a cigarette tastes puffs at one and experiences disgusts or repugnance, he would most likely use any of the interjections in (5) instead of those in (6):

(5) Yuk! Ugh!
(6) Wow! Uhm!

This fact, together with the fact that some of these interjections are produced with very specific suprasegmental or prosodic features, as well as paralinguistic features such as gestures or grimaces, could make us wonder whether these interjections do not really encode anything. In fact, they seem to be used with a more or less restricted range of potential meanings or senses and not any meaning or sense whatsoever. This would suggest that such interjections could encode some sort of concept, even if vague or general, which hearers would have to subsequently determine through inference. If there were interjections whose meaning is not clear at all, those would be ephemeral interjections that do not take root in the linguistic system because they arise as spontaneous, involuntary reactions and are probably used on very few occasions.

Whether or not interjections encode some conceptual content has also been an issue of much debate in pragmatics. Most authors acknowledge that interjections cannot be interpreted unless placed in a particular social and discourse context. In fact, as has been pointed, there are interjections that may have opposed senses and meanings depending on the situation in which they are produced, so their interpretation crucially depends on the context where they appear (Vassileva 1994, 2007; Smidt 2002; Aijmer 2004; Buridant 2006; Światkowska 2006).

Although the philosopher H. P. Grice (1957, 1975) did not address interjections, if we had to apply his theoretical apparatus to explain what they contribute to communication and how they are interpreted, we should admit that, if
they do not encode any conceptual meaning, they would not contribute anything to ‘what is said’ and, hence, could not communicate anything explicitly. Rather, they would contribute to the domain of ‘what is implied’ and, hence, communicate implicitly. They would contribute to the generation of conventional or conversational implicatures. However, while in the Gricean framework linguistic expressions giving rise to conventional implicatures –e.g. discourse markers– are taken to have some basic content, interjections lack that content, so they would only interact with encyclopaedic and contextual information to yield conversational implicatures regarding their sense in a particular context or what the speaker might have intended to communicate.

3. Conceptualist approaches to interjections

In contrast to the non-conceptualist view of interjections, other authors have argued that they are conceptual elements. One of these authors is Wilkins (1992, 1995), who has defended his proposal on the basis of one of their features: indexicality. Wilkins (1992, 1995) saw the indexical nature of interjections to amount to subcategorising some hidden referential or deictic components which would enable interjections to point to elements in the extralinguistic context necessary for their full interpretation. Those referential or deictic components would be constituents of an underlying proposition, whose argument slots they would fill in, and would encourage the hearer to look for the extralinguistic elements that must be inserted in those slots so as to get a fully fledged proposition (Wilkins 1992: 132). However, for the hearer to correctly develop a proposition, he must also rely on another feature of interjections: in addition to being indexical elements, they are also conventionalised, which means that they are connected with the emotions or feelings that they are repeatedly perceived to express. This description of interjections as indexical and conventionalised elements led Wilkins (1992, 1995) to suggest that they are incomplete lexemes that only offer a vague clue about a proposition that the speaker wants to transmit with them. As a result, Wilkins (1992: 120; 1995) concluded that interjections do have some conceptual content, even if vague or general, which can be subsequently specified by resorting to the contextual information they point and information regarding their previous intentional occurrences in specific contexts.

Wilkins’s (1992, 1995) viewpoint was clearly in consonance with Wierzbicka’s (1991, 1992). This author also believed that interjections have a conceptual structure, which can be decomposed using ‘universal’ or ‘near-universal’ concepts that capture their basic meaning or senses. According to her, since interjections

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1 For a more detailed explanation, see Torres Sánchez (2000: 86-88).
have some conceptual load, emotive/expressive interjections have a meaning that can be explicated through the formula ‘I feel X’, while the meaning of conative or volitive interjections is ‘I want X’. Wierzbicka (1991, 1992) analysed interjections in a decompositional way, which permits us to grasp their nuances or shades of meaning. Thus, the conceptual structure of wow would be as follows:

(7) a. I now know something.
    b. I wouldn’t have thought I would know it.
    c. I think it is very good.
    d. (I wouldn’t have thought it would be like that).
    e. I feel something because of that.

With their proposals, Wilkins (1992, 1995) and Wierzbicka (1991, 1992) clearly positioned themselves in opposition to those authors who claimed that interjections are not speech acts because they lack an illocutionary dictum and cannot be reported by verbs of saying (cfr. Ameka 1992b; Calvo Pérez 1996). According to those authors, interjections would be incomplete or defective speech acts that only show the speaker’s illocutionary force toward an implicit content that must be recovered through inference. More recently, Wharton (2000, 2001, 2003) has reacted against Wierzbicka’s (1991, 1992) and Wilkins’s (1992, 1995) claims. Following some of the tenets of relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2002, 2004), he has proposed a procedural analysis thereof, to which I turn in the following section.

4. The procedural shift in the analysis of interjections

Wharton (2003) adduces various reasons to reject the idea that interjections encode concepts. Following Fodor (1981), he firstly states that very few words – and, by extension, interjections— are decomposable in satisfactory definitions or formulas like those proposed by Wierzbicka (1991, 1992), whose accuracy is by far questionable. Secondly, Wharton (2003: 45-46) also argues that in many cases the same interjection can be used to express both positive and negative feelings and some of their meaning aspects may even escape from those formulas. Accordingly, wow could potentially communicate things such as surprise, mild surprise, amazement, astonishment or utter bewilderment, so the same interjection could virtually communicate a wide range of emotions and feelings that “[…] seems to go well beyond anything capturable in conceptual structures […]” (Wharton 2003: 46). Thirdly, even if Wierzbicka (1991, 1992) and Wilkins (1992, 1995) postulated the existence of underlying propositional schemas containing uninterpreted indexicals that must be filled in referentially, he considers interjections to be so context-dependent that it appears quite unlikely that the only task hearers have to
do when interpreting them is to develop those schemas by assigning reference to the indexicals interjections subcategorise. Rather, their context-dependence requires a significant amount of contextual information to be used for inferences. Fourthly, Wharton (2003: 47) sees interjections as being halfway between the natural and the linguistic. Some of them share with grimaces or screams an element of spontaneity, while others appear to be rather cultural, partly 'coded'. Fifthly, although we could decompose interjections to very elementary conceptual structures, in those cases in which an interjection co-occurs with an utterance to whose semantics it is related, there would be an unnecessary redundancy. Thus, if we take ow to encode something like 'I feel pain', in (8) we would be faced with an unnecessary conceptual repetition:

(8) a. Ow! I feel pain!
    b. I feel pain! I feel pain!

Finally, Wharton (2003: 48-49) rejects the claim that interjections encode concepts because they do not contribute to the truth-conditions of the utterances they accompany. If interjections had conceptual representations, it could be possible to test their truth or falsity, they could contradict or imply other concepts and act as input to logical inference rules. However, they do not seem to have these properties.

For these reasons, and based on the relevance-theoretic distinction between conceptual and procedural meaning, and between lower- and higher-level explicatures (Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995; Blakemore 1987, 2002; Wilson and Sperber 1993, 2002, 2004; Carston 2002a), Wharton suggests that interjections might be “[...] indicators of higher-level explicatures, containing speech-act or propositional-attitude information” (2003: 54). As such, they do not contribute to the truth-conditional content of the proposition they accompany, but instruct the hearer to embed that proposition under a speech-act or propositional-attitude description, which in relevance-theoretic terms is labelled as higher-level explicature. Therefore, interjections would behave in a way similar to some discourse particles (e.g. Blass 1989; Wilson and Sperber 1993; Itani 1998). Accordingly, the interjections in (9a) and (10a) would make the hearer embed the propositions expressed and construct the higher-level explicatures in (9b) and (10b), respectively:

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2 In relevance-theoretic pragmatics, conceptual expressions encode representations, while procedural elements encode instructions about how to process information. The lower-level explicatures of an utterance is its pragmatically enriched logical form, while its higher-level explicatures is the result of embedding its lower-level explicatures under a speech-act or propositional-attitude description.
In this framework, interjections are taken to project the speaker’s emotion, feeling or attitude towards the propositions they accompany. However, Wharton (2003: 57) admits that the questions of what and how interjections communicate requires different answers depending on specific circumstances. In those circumstances in which, as above, interjections are juxtaposed or appended to a proposition, it is easy to see that the emotion, feeling or attitude that they express is projected towards that proposition. On the contrary, in those circumstances in which there is no immediately adjacent proposition, Wharton (2003: 56-57) contends that interjections communicate a feeling or sensation towards a percept or object that causes specific responses and reactions. Such feeling or sensation is not described, but just expressed, so it cannot be representational.

A reflection on the problems that this procedural account poses has led me to argue that the procedural meaning of interjections could be different (Padilla Cruz 2009). As Wharton (2003) puts it, the instructions encoded by interjections seem to encourage hearers to construct higher-level explicatures when there is an adjacent or juxtaposed proposition, but to activate attitudinal concepts or descriptions when there is no immediately adjacent proposition. If interjections encoded procedures, their instructions should be the same and work in the same way in all possible contexts. Moreover, as Wałaszeska (2004) rightly notes, when there is no adjacent proposition constituting a lower-level explicatures, it is difficult to see what could be embedded under the higher-level explicatures interjections would make hearers construct.

It is evident that interjections may contribute to higher-level explicatures in the same way as discourse particles do. However, in plenty of cases higher-level explicatures may be constructed just on the basis of mood indicators or suprasegmental features such as intonation (Escandell Vidal 1998; Fretheim 1998; Wilson and Wharton 2006; Clark and Wharton 2009). When interjections accompany an adjacent propositional utterance, they could interact with those indicators or features and provide hearers with additional evidence on which to rely in order to construct its higher-level explicature. In this case, interjections would act as a sort of reinforcement to mood indicators or suprasegmental features; hearers would additionally exploit interjections when constructing higher-level explicatures that may already be partially or totally determined by those indicators and features. On the other hand, apart from contributing to higher-level explicatures together with mood indicators and suprasegmental features, interjections may also contribute to the meaning of some lexical items appearing in the proposition expressed (Carston, personal communication). Therefore, they
would help hearers to narrow or loose those items in order to create *ad hoc* concepts. Thus, when the speaker utters (11) at the dentist’s, the interjection could be thought to help the hearer to adjust the meaning of the noun ‘pain’ and make him infer that the pain the speaker is feeling is more intense than could have been initially expected or is unbearable:

(11) **Ow! I feel pain!**

In this context, the hearer could certainly embed the proposition expressed under a propositional-attitude description relying solely on the exclamative intonation with which the utterance is pronounced, without the interjection being indispensable to do so. The interjection in question could probably contribute to the semantic adjustment of a lexical constituent of the proposition expressed and support the higher-level explicate the hearer may construct on the basis of the utterance’s intonation.

For these reasons, and partially based on the works of those authors who see interjections as indexicals, I have argued that, if interjections encoded any procedural meaning, that meaning could amount to instructions encouraging hearers to access contextual material that helps them understand in a more complete way what speakers express, i.e. their informative intention. Individuals resort to emotive/expressive interjections because they (have) perceive(d) an object, event, action or state of affairs that causes them a certain emotion, feeling or attitude at a certain moment. That emotion, feeling or attitude may be originated by those perceptible contextual elements, but they may equally be targeted to those elements. Consequently, emotive/expressive interjections could be thought to encode procedures that incite hearers to look for either what originates the emotion, feeling or attitude speakers experience and express or what the target of such emotion, feeling or attitude may be. On the other hand, individuals resort to conative/volitive interjections when they intend another individual (not) to perform a particular action. These interjections are orders and, as such, they are projected bi-directionally: they are projected towards (i) some mutually manifest action or state of affairs that the speaker presents as desirable, and (ii) the individual the speaker expects or intends will perform that action or bring about that state of affairs. As a result, conative/volitive interjections can be thought to encode procedures that encourage hearers to search for what the speaker intends someone (not) to do and for whom that person may be.

Under Wharton’s (2000, 2001, 2003) approach, interjections would be procedural expressions that guide inferential computations, do not affect the truth-conditional content of the utterances they appear with and do not encode concepts. However, this last claim does not seem uncontroversial. Most authors contend that interjections do have some social and discourse meaning. Although many of them adhere to the non-conceptualist view, it does not seem clear at all that interjections
do not encode anything. For example, Wałaszeska (2004: 124-126) comments that, if interjections led to the activation of propositional-attitude or speech-act descriptions, such descriptions would require a conceptual basis, even if weak or vague. Research in interjections from different perspectives has shown some facts that could make us question their apparent lack of conceptual content. Therefore, could we really take for granted that interjections are not conceptual expressions?

5. **On the (lack of) conceptual content of interjections**

Wharton (2003) certainly finds compelling reasons to deny interjections a conceptual status:

a) They do not seem to have synonymous conceptual equivalents.

b) They cannot be taken to imply other concepts.

c) They cannot be the input to inferential rules.

d) Interjectional utterances cannot be said to be true or false. Since they belong to the category of *expressives* (Searle 1969), they lack truth conditions. At most, interjectional utterances can be tested in terms of the speaker’s alleged (in)sincerity.

These reasons may certainly override any claim about the conceptuality of interjections. Nevertheless, there are some astonishing facts related to them which could make us reconsider their apparent non-conceptual nature. Such facts have to do with the usage of interjections, their origin and evolution, production, acquisition in both first and second languages and translation into different languages.

5.1. **Some arguments to reconsider the conceptuality of interjections**

The first argument that can be adduced to reconsider interjections’ apparent lack of conceptual content was pointed out by Schourup (2001: 1044). This is not other than the fact that we cannot use many interjections indistinctively or interchangeably in the same context, as there seem to be fixed conditions and severe restrictions on their use. For instance, it is quite frequent to hear interjections such as *bravo* or the Spanish *olé* after a performance when the audience has enjoyed it. In this context, it would be rather weird to use *alas*, *ow* or *oops* if the audience really wants to express their admiration of the performance or their approval about the way the actors performed. Similarly, it would be quite usual to hear an individual utter *yuk* or *arrg* after tasting a bowl of horribly salty soup in order to express disgust or repulsion. Unless probably ironically, that individual would not resort to *wow* or *ahm* Then, if there are these restrictions on
the use of interjections, could not we say that they encode any conceptual content? In fact, as Clark and Fox Tree (2002: 75) explain, interjections must be planned for, formulated and produced as part of utterances as any other word is. Speakers must monitor some contextual factors, conceptualise the situation where they are interacting and, then, select an appropriate interjection that matches their communicative purpose and produce it. If there is a conceptualisation phase in the production of interjections, could not it be possible that their selection is affected by the perception and assessment of some constant content?

A second argument to question the non-conceptual view of interjections may be the very origin and subsequent evolution of many interjections. Interjections constitute an open word class that is constantly receiving ‘newcomers’ (Quirk et al. 1985: 74; Buridant 2006: 7). It is rather frequent to find novel and highly idiosyncratic interjections arising and spreading in the speech of some social, age, ethnic or gender groups, which individuals belonging to other groups would not resort to because those interjections are not in their respective inventories. Many of those individuals may even have difficulties understanding them. Some years ago, for example, it was almost a sign of social distinctiveness and adscription to a very specific social group among teenage speakers of Peninsular Spanish to use interjections such as guay or dabuti. Nobody or very few people might know how and why these interjections arose and spread, but when they started to be used, very few people might know what they really meant – except, obviously, speakers belonging to certain groups, if they really did– so they had to be interpreted inferentially because individuals might not have encyclopaedic information about their usages or potential meanings – i.e. they were not conventionalised or scarcely so. These innovative interjections, however, somehow took root in the population and many speakers progressively started to use and understand them as a consequence of their repetition in the same sort of contexts with the same sort of intended meaning, or by thinking which other ‘canonical’ interjection(s) they would have used instead in such a situation. As time went by, these interjections got their range of usage more restricted or, in other words, they were more specialised for very specific contexts and expressive shades. If such a specialisation took place, would it not be possible that these and other interjections started to be associated with something more specific than assumptions about their usage and potential meanings? Could it not be possible that some interjections become associated with some conceptual content, even if vague or general, as Wałaszewska (2004) suggests? In this case, dabuti and guay are rather recent interjections. With more permanent interjections in the linguistic system as those mentioned above, it could also be hypothesised that they started to encode something as they got specialised for the expression of some emotions, feelings or attitudes.
Continuing with the example of the mentioned Spanish interjections, there came a time when it was rather frequent to describe things as guay instead of bonito, bueno, impresionante or any other positive adjective related to the semantic fields of beauty, goodness or astonishment. Whether the interjection arose first and then gave rise to the adjective or it was the other way round may be a matter of controversy owing to its use in spoken registers. Nevertheless, this fact suggests that there might be something constantly associated with the interjection. If the interjection originated first and then the adjective, it could be possible that the interjection acquired some conceptual content that was subsequently transferred to the new adjective arising from it. Greenbaum (2000: 183) has also noted a similar phenomenon in English: nowadays there are verbs, such as boo, pooh-pooh, tut-tut or wow, which originated in interjections. Of these, boo and tut-tut are also nouns. And if one has a look at the *Oxford English Dictionary*, its entry for ‘wow’ actually reflects its verbal usage, which reveals that it may be widely accepted by speakers as such.

Going back to the Spanish interjections, if, on the contrary, the adjective appeared first and then the interjection, the adjective would already have had per se some conceptual load that might have been diluted or loosened when it gave rise to the interjection. Even if the concept encoded by the adjective was rather imprecise and had therefore to be fine-tuned through inferential processes so as to create an *ad hoc* concept (Barsalou 1987; Carston 1996, 2002a, 2002b; Sperber and Wilson 1997; Wilson and Carston 2007; Sperber and Wilson 2008), that diluted or loosened concept might have been transferred to the interjection. In the case of some secondary interjections, there may still be some traces of initial conceptual meanings that the interjections have inherited from the words originating them, which may even act as constraints on their expressive potential. If these two processes mentioned actually occur –i.e. that lexical categories with conceptual content give rise to interjections and that nouns, adjectives or verbs originate from interjections– they would evidence that ‘conceptuality’ is a property that can be acquired, retained, modified or lost. In fact, this is one of the reasons why many words undergo semantic change throughout history. Moreover, these two processes would also imply that ‘conceptuality’ can be a scalar property: there could be items that are, so to say, ‘more conceptual’ or ‘less conceptual’ than others. If this is right, interjections could be postulated to be ‘less conceptual’ than nouns or adjectives, but to still have some conceptual content. In addition, within the very category of interjections, some could be thought to be ‘more conceptual’ than others.

A third argument to rethink the non-conceptual view is based on the prosodic features with which interjections are produced. Non-conceptualists do not admit that interjections encode concepts on the grounds that the same interjection can express different emotions in different contexts. This seems indisputable:
interjections such as oh, ow, oops or alas do seem to be vehicles to express different emotions or shades thereof on different occasions. However, these interjections are produced with differing suprasegmental or prosodic features on those occasions, and those features may be the responsible of those differing, even (radically) opposed meanings. It is certainly not the same to utter or shout some interjections with a high falling tone, a low falling tone, a fall-rise or a rise-fall. Depending on the tone with which wow is emitted, its meaning may range from mild surprise, to utter surprise, unpleasant surprise or unexpected surprise, for instance. In each case, its meaning changes, but it changes on the basis of something all the occurrences of the interjection could have in common, some sort of idea associated with it. Why do we then end up concluding that different instances of wow express different variations of a same feeling or emotion? Or, more generally, why do we conclude that oh, yuk or arrg all express emotions or feelings and can sort them out as emotive/expressive interjections and differentiate them from other interjections on the grounds that they express emotions? Emotive/expressive interjections certainly express emotions, feelings or attitudes, but there might probably be something very general, vague or schematic underlying them, some conceptual content that is common to some or all of them. These and other interjections could be thought, therefore, to encode some very schematic conceptual material which, so to say, could be scalar, gradable or allow for further specification or restriction along different points on a scale. Prosodic information would interact with that conceptual content as a consequence of its procedural nature (Escandell Vidal 1998; Fretheim 1998; Wilson and Wharton 2006; Clark and Wharton 2009) and would thus contribute to the necessary adjustments in it.

A further reason to question the non-conceptualist view stems from the fact that interjections are acquired or learnt when individuals acquire their native languages (Meng and Schrabback 1999; Montes 1999; Clark and Fox Tree 2002). What do speakers learn when acquiring interjections? Do they learn the conventions for using them or do they learn to make pairings between specific items and some conceptual material? If speakers just learn conventions of usage, why do they have to learn some specific conventions and not to establish their own? Even when learning a second language, individuals have to learn the interjections being part of its target linguistic system. In many cases, second language learners transfer interjections, fillers or particles from their own first language, which do not work in the second language and give rise to funny situations and misunderstandings, and make their speech sound foreign. When second language learners learn about interjections, what do they learn? Norms, rules and conventions of their usage, or pairings between specific interjections and some concepts? Even if they learnt norms, rules or conventions of usage, those conventions would be based on the existence of some notions that are expressible in their target language, as they are
in their native one. In close connection with this, when translating from one language into another, interjections pose many problems and difficulties to translators. In some cases, they find appropriate equivalents because there are valid cognates, but in other cases they have to resort to reaction signals, discourse markers, idioms, stereotyped expressions or lexical elements with conceptual content (Vassileva 1994; Fischer and Drescher 1996; Sierra Soriano 1999; Aijmer 2004). If translators have to be extremely careful with interjections, would that be because they are conventionalised for some expressive purposes in different languages or because different languages make differing conceptual mappings onto interjections?

5.2. Interjections and conventionalisation

All the arguments given above could be rejected on the ground of the reasons given by Wharton (2003) and on the basis of the conventionalised nature of interjections (e.g. Wilkins 1992; Clark and Fox Tree 2002). As a consequence of their repeated usage in (a) certain context(s), some interjections are connected with specific meanings or senses. Thus, after having repeatedly observed a person shout "ow" or "oh" when she feels pain, these interjections may be connected with that feeling when the adequate contextual factors apply and specific paralinguistic elements accompany them, just in the same way "wow" could be associated with a feeling of surprise. In relevance-theoretic pragmatics, that interjections are conventionalised involves that individuals would have available assumptions regarding their contexts of usage and potential meanings in those contexts (Nicole and Clark 1998; Žegarac 1998). Such assumptions would constrain their selection and subsequent interpretation by supplying candidate meanings or senses upon which the hearer has to make decisions. Understood in this way, conventionalisation might support the non-conceptual view of interjections: all we need to work out if an interjection can be used at a particular moment and how the hearer will interpret it is just some knowledge about their most frequent or predictable meanings or senses in such a context or a similar one.

However, conventionalisation is but a partially valid argument to support this view. There are plenty of interjections that are permanent in the inventory of a language and show little or no variation across speakers, time and/or places. This might evidence that speakers identify a similar content in those interjections or recognise them as appropriate means to express some (specific) meanings or senses. Admittedly, it could be contended that those interjections display little variation because their degree of conventionalisation is so high that interlocutors probably have access to the same sort of assumptions that lead them to similar inferences about the meaning of interjections. Nonetheless, it could also be
reasonable to think that, if those interjections have reached an extreme degree of conventionalisation, speakers might not have only associated them with assumptions about their usage and meaning, but also with some conceptual content.

Reasons can be given so as not to immediately discard the assumption that interjections are conceptual elements. If interjections are selected after monitoring and conceptualising external or internal factors, if they cannot be freely replaced by others in some contexts, if they arise from or give rise to items with conceptual content, if individuals acquire and have to learn them when learning a first or second language, it might be possible that interjections have some conceptual basis that maps onto them. The questions that now arise are what that conceptual content could be and whether all interjections would have it.

5.3. What kind of concepts might interjections encode?

We do have concepts –“[…] words of mentalese”, as Sperber and Wilson (1997: 107) put it – which may have natural language counterparts: the words we use to express them. However, the mapping between words and concepts is not exhaustive. There may be concepts for which there is no natural language word, although they can be encoded by means of a phrase; words lacking a conceptual counterpart; different words that correspond to one concept, which is what happens with synonyms, and different concepts that are mapped onto one single word, which is what happens with homonyms.

Words such as personal pronouns do not encode concepts. They behave as slot fillers or place holders, and encode procedures that make hearers retrieve a specific referent. Thus, she or he and the forms belonging to their respective paradigms encourage hearers to search for an adequate referent that satisfies certain conditions of number and gender (Blakemore 1992; Wilson and Sperber 1993; Sperber and Wilson 1997; Wilson 1997). Other words, on the contrary, have some sort of conceptual content, but, as in the case of personal pronouns, “[…] their semantic contribution must be contextually specified for the associated utterance to have a truth-value” (Sperber and Wilson 1997: 108; emphasis in the original). This is the case of words like my, have, near or long. These words seem to encode what these authors label a pro-concept, i.e. a concept that is not full fledged, but needs to be fleshed out into a full concept. However, Sperber and Wilson make a radical claim: pro-concepts are so common that “[…] all words behave as if they encoded pro-concepts” (1997: 108; emphasis in the original), for their semantic meaning must be contextually worked out. Accordingly, it could be reasonable to argue that, if interjections encoded some conceptual content, that content would not amount to proper full concepts, but to pro-concepts that have to do with emotions, feelings,
attitudes or mental states, which would have to be contextually specified or fleshed out.

Emotions, feelings and attitudes are certainly rather fuzzy and ungraspable. It is true that most of us may, and actually are able to, discriminate different types of emotions, feelings or attitudes. For example, we can distinguish happiness from sadness, or homesickness from melancholy. If we can do this, it is rather reasonable to think that we may have concepts for those emotions or feelings. Focusing on a particular emotion or feeling, we could even discriminate shades thereof: we may experience that it differs from another in some respects in terms of intensity or perception of a diverse nuance. If interjections encode pro-concepts, those pro-concepts must capture some sort of “[…] enduring elementary mental structure, which is capable of playing different discriminatory or inferential roles on different occasions in an individual mental life” (Sperber and Wilson 1997: 112). Nevertheless, it would not be that reasonable to think that we have as many concepts for emotions and their shades as discriminations we can make thereof.

It can be admitted that, when an individual produces an interjection because she experiences a certain feeling, she may form or construct an idiosyncratic, personal concept “[…] on the basis of private and unsharable experience” (Sperber and Wilson 1997: 112). For this task, in addition to her experience, she must rely on her personal discriminatory abilities. Some of such concepts may lack corresponding public words and would therefore be ineffable. If interjections encode concepts, they would not encode that type of highly idiosyncratic and specific concepts wherewith we could conceptualise many precise shades of emotions. If anything, they would encode very general, vague or schematic pro-concepts, something like hyperonyms that can subsume or accommodate other more specific concepts corresponding to the nuances or shades of emotions individuals are able to distinguish. Those pro-concepts might be stable and effable, even if some of them may not actually map onto words (Sperber and Wilson 1997: 113). Furthermore, those pro-concepts would allow for the creation of other more idiosyncratic concepts. Accordingly, emotive/expressive interjections like oh, ow, ouch, wow, etc. will encode something enduring, permanent, which might be related to the domain of emotions or feelings, while conative/volitive interjections like oi, psst, etc. will encode some permanent conceptual material linked to the domain of wants or intentions. It may be possible that the items belonging to those types of interjections also encode some pro-concepts that are related to more specific types of emotions or wants, for which there may be corresponding natural language words, but it may be equally possible that they have some meanings which is not lexicalised because individuals lack stable concepts for them, so those meanings might only be encodable by means of phrasal or sentential structures. Thus, ouch could mean to some individuals ‘intense pain’ or ‘unbearable pain’ or ‘a more intense pain than the one you experience when you just scratch your arm’.
Damasio (1994) and Goleman (1995) consider that there are different types of emotions. The former proposes that there are five major emotions –happiness, sadness, anger, fear and disgust– whilst the latter increases the number of emotions to eight –anger, sadness, fear, enjoyment, love, surprise, disgust and shame. These general types of emotions, in Damasio’s (1994) opinion, subsume other more specific emotions, which would be like subtypes or subtler variations of the major types. Thus, euphoria would be subsumed by happiness, of which it would be a more specific and subtler differentiated subtype, whereas melancholy would be included under sadness. Be that as it may be, these two authors’ ideas could make us conclude that individuals somehow categorise the realm of emotions, feelings and attitudes by means of general concepts like the ones linked to the types of emotions they suggest. Such (pro-)concepts would have to be subsequently narrowed or loosened in different directions, and the outputs of such process may significantly differ depending on personal experience, perceptual accuracy and conceptual distinctions individuals are able to make.

Initially, those (pro-)concepts could be activated by interjections, as Wharton (2003) suggests, but the repeated and constant activation of the same (type of) concept related to the domain of a particular emotion, feeling, attitude or want by an interjection could end up in a relatively stable connection between that interjection and the concept activated. Many interjections could begin to be associated with the very broad concept FEELING. Later on, as those interjections appear in more specific contexts with different nuances or expressive shades, the result of the repeated narrowing or specification of the initial concept associated connected with them in one or another direction could lead some of those interjections to be associated with a more specific content subsumed by the initial broad concept. Thus, from a set of interjections that starts being associated with the general concept FEELING, some of them can become specialised for activating the concept HAPPINESS, while others for activating the concept SADNESS. Of those specialised for activating the concept HAPPINESS, there could be some that later on become specialised for activating the concept EUPHORIA and others for activating the concept JOY, both concepts subsumed by HAPPINESS. Obviously, there could be interjections that do not achieve this specialisation and remain associated with broader concepts, but those broader concepts would also have to be contextually adjusted. That could be the case of oh, which seems to express contradictory feelings ranging from happiness and euphoria to sadness and melancholy. When this type of interjections is used, the speaker might have neatly conceptualised what she feels or experiences or not, but the hearer will have to narrow the concept that it activates so as to get a good appraisal of the emotion or feeling he takes the speaker to be expressing. The hearer will have to solve the apparent ‘polysemy’ of the interjection relying on paralinguistic and prosodic information, which will certainly help him restrict its meaning potential. Obviously
too, there may be interjections that achieve this specification for some speakers, but not for some others, or interjections whose meaning potential is restricted in one direction for some individuals and in some other direction for some other individuals. This certainly implies that we should not be categorical when dealing with interjections and allow for the possibility of a whole range of diverging cases.

5.4. Might all interjections encode (pro-)concepts?

Interjections constitute a heterogeneous word class not only because of the origin of the elements it includes, but also because of their range of usage and diffusion. There is a group of interjections that comprises those spontaneous and involuntary verbal reactions to particular stimuli. Some of them may be ephemeral because they are used once or on very few occasions and do not take root in the linguistic system. Others, on the contrary, even if novel, progressively start to take root in it and expand their range of usage. Following Wilson and Wharton (2006), spontaneous and involuntary interjections would be natural signs because they are not inherently communicative, but they carry information about the speaker’s states by providing evidence for them. Those interjections may not be stable in the language, or may be about to undergo a process of stabilisation or stylisation in it. Consequently, there would not be any conceptual material associated with them, so they would have to be interpreted fully inferentially.

On the other hand, there are interjections which are undergoing a process of stabilisation in the inventory of a language or have already accomplished it, for they have some sort of continued history which has made them become valid devices for specific expressive purposes. Although those interjections could have originated spontaneously, their repeated usage gained a place in the linguistic inventory for them as a way to express more or less specific emotions, feelings or attitudes. Consequently, they acquired more or less restricted functions, such as to carry more or less precise information when they were intentionally used in overt communication. When they acquired this function, they became inherently communicative, as they specialised for certain communicative or expressive purposes. As interjections stabilise in the inventory of a language, they would progressively lose their status as natural signs and acquire a new one: that of natural signals. As such, they may point to a range of more or less fuzzy, vague or specific meanings or senses. Therefore, those interjections that progressively stabilise in a language and become natural signals could be thought to be associated with schematic conceptual material, with very general and primary concepts similar to hyperonyms that can subsume other more specific concepts related to the conceptual area they denote. Those concepts would be related to different types of feelings, emotions or attitudes, in the case of emotive/expressive
interjections, or to the speaker’s wants or desires, their types and intensity. Such concepts would be scalar and, owing precisely to this feature and their vagueness, would have to be subsequently fine-tuned. This fine-tuning would take place as a result of joint processing with prosodic and paralinguistic information and the subsequent operation of the procedures these types of information enact. The result of the fine-tuning of the concepts associated with interjections need not be another full fledged concept, but may be another vague one that captures notions such as ‘positive feeling’, ‘negative feeling’, ‘strong want’, ‘mild want’, etc.

This notwithstanding, the more frequently interjections activate some concepts, the more constantly they are associated with those concepts and the more specific those concepts, the more ‘coded’ and the closer to natural signals interjections could be. If there are interjections invariably used with very specific expressive values, speakers could have linked them to very specific concepts. As interjections customarily activate (a) very specific concept(s) and get their range of possible meanings restricted, they would move along the continuum from the category of natural signals to the category of linguistic signals. If this happened, there would be interjections that could become inherently communicative and could be thought to carry information by coding. As opposed to natural signs and natural signals, those very extreme cases of interjections could be primarily geared to use in ostensive-inferential communication (Wilson and Wharton 2006).

To sum up, not all interjections might encode concepts. They seem to move along a continuum between natural signs and linguistic signals. Some must be interpreted inferentially; others may activate and encode rather general, schematic and vague concepts, and others more specific concepts. Even if it is not perfect, communication based on encoding-decoding is probably less misleading than other communicative practices, as it relies on the usage of coded signals that activate some conceptual structures. However, coded communication always involves a certain amount of inference: once the speaker ostensively produces a verbal coded signal, the conceptual structure activated in the hearer’s mind must be enriched or adjusted with contextual information in order to discover the message the speaker intends to communicate. What gets activated in the hearer’s mind may significantly differ from the final message he infers, for it may be fragmentary, imprecise or ambiguous. For instance, when a speaker says something like (12) or (13), the hearer has to work out what the speaker took ‘drink’ to mean (‘drink a lot of alcohol’?, ‘drink water too often’?, etc.) or what the speaker took ‘lion’ to mean (John is brave? John is strong? John is strong and fierce?).

(12) You drink too much.
(13) John is a lion.

Although the relative reliability of coded communication stems from pairings between words and concepts, it also has a certain degree of indeterminacy.
Relevance-theoretic pragmatists and cognitive scientists have stressed that word meaning is not constant, but context-dependent. Even if words activate or encode some conceptual material, that material must be fine-tuned in context as a conversation unfolds and comprehension proceeds. To put it differently, meaning is always constructed contextually, and the result of the necessary adjustments is ad hoc concepts (Barsalou 1987; Sperber and Wilson 1997; Carston 1996, 2002a, 2002b; Wilson and Carston 2007; Sperber and Wilson 2008). If lexical elements having a semantic content like nouns, verbs or adjectives are somewhat indeterminate and their meaning must always be worked out, interjections are even much more indeterminate. There would be some that do not encode any concept, others that encode pro-concepts that may give rise to much more idiosyncratic or specific concepts and still others that encode more specific concepts.

As can be seen, this proposal radically contrasts with most of the extant approaches to interjections. If it was right, it may have some implications which the next section addresses.

5.5. Some implications

As Sperber and Wilson (1997: 118) explain, some of the notions individuals have may not be lexicalised in a natural language because they are occasional and highly idiosyncratic, and very much depend on the context where a stimulus is processed. Individuals may nevertheless encode those notions by resorting to paraphrases, but may lack words for them. Other notions, on the other hand, may stabilise and individuals may end up having some kind of mental entry or file for them, so they meet the requisites for becoming concepts.

Regarding interjections, some of them may be used in so spontaneous, unconscious or highly innovative a way that hearers have to use inference in order to create afresh a concept that grasps what they sense their interlocutors mean. Other interjections, on the contrary, may be connected with some sort of pro-concept that captures some sort of general, broad meaning common to them as a result of evolution or customary use under the same repeated circumstances. That pro-concept would have to be enriched and developed inferentially like any other concept so as to capture the various shades of emotions or mental states the speaker is thought to express. A consequence of routine or repeated enrichments in one direction or another may be the subsequent modification or specification of that pro-concept. Therefore, some interjections could move from encoding general pro-concepts to encoding something that gets closer to a full concept. If that were the case, more specific shades or nuances would be lexicalised in those interjections as a result of having been routinely enriched in a certain way and with a relatively similar outcome. Repeated or recurrent adjustments in the processing of
interjections may result in an association between interjections and more or less precise conceptual material. Consequently, some of the meanings or senses that some interjections are routinely taken to express may become lexicalised if those interjections are customarily resorted to in order to express them.

Some interjections with schematic conceptual content might be used in such specific circumstances that they would be associated with more precise concepts. If those pro-concepts were shared by the members of some social groups, those interjections might be used and interpreted less equivocally, i.e. there would be less room for misunderstanding when interpreting them. Similarly, there may be interjections associated with more or less highly idiosyncratic pro-concepts which, despite such idiosyncrasy, may be similar enough to the idiosyncratic pro-concepts other individuals have associated to those very interjections as a consequence of common experience or communication. Finally, there may be interjections which individuals do not associate with any pro-concept or that only some individuals associate with a pro-concept that is highly idiosyncratic and not the same for all the members of that social group.

On the contrary, the meanings or senses of those other interjections that are used involuntarily or created anew are reached inferentially and would not be constrained or determined by any conceptual element. Even in the case of interjections with a certain conceptual load, that conceptual content would be but the starting point for their interpretation process. The shades many interjections express are so unique in many cases that they do not stabilise into concepts (Sperber and Wilson 1997: 121). This might probably explain why there are no words for them and we have to resort to those types of interjections, if we want to express them. It is certainly a matter of much speculation whether humans conceptualise reality by forging new concepts every time we make a new discrimination or just by storing data within pre-existing mental files. With the realm of emotions, feelings and attitudes there does not seem to be a clear answer either. Just as there are individuals who are able to discriminate many subtle nuances of objects, smells or tastes, describe them and, probably, conceptualise them, those individuals may also discriminate many shades of emotions and even conceptualise them, but they may lack natural language words to express them. They may feel something very precise for which they may have a concept but, in want of a precise word that expresses it, they resort to some interjections and pass the burden of the interpretive process to the hearer.

Nevertheless, the fact that some interjections are paired with some conceptual material should not mean that all the speakers of a language do the same sort of pairings between interjections and particular pro-concepts or any pairing at all. Such pairings are the result of repeated processing and obtaining a constant similar outcome that stabilises. It takes some time for a word to stabilise in a language; its stabilisation “[…] is a slow and relatively rare process, involving co-ordination
among many individuals over time” (Sperber and Wilson 1997: 122). In the case of interjections, such pairings between concepts and particular interjections and their stabilisation must also take some time or be restricted to only some groups of individuals. This may probably account for why diverse social groups show variation when using interjections: they may have paired particular interjections with different pro-concepts, some of their speakers may have made the pairing but not others, or they have not paired interjections with any concept at all. If those pairings are made, the range of expressive shades interjections may communicate would certainly become more restricted, but even so, owing to the schematic nature of pro-concepts, they would be allowing for a certain expressive and interpretive leeway.

6. Conclusion

It is still certainly unclear if all interjections do or do not encode any conceptual content. This work has not opted for one position over the other, but adopted an intermediate standpoint, probably a compromise solution –pace with the conceptualists, pace with the non-conceptualists. It has argued that, owing to their heterogeneity, openness, evolution and variation in usage, it should not be categorically stated that all interjections do (not) encode concepts. Rather, there would be a whole cline of cases ranging from those indisputably non-conceptual, to others that might encode extremely general and vague concepts and others that might encode more precise concepts. There are sound and compelling arguments that prevent us from admitting that interjections encode concepts, but there are also equally firm and convincing reasons to conjecture that they could do so. By postulating the encoding of pro-concepts by interjections, some regularities observable in their use could be justified. Nevertheless, the answer to this problem may not be general and apply to all the constituents of this word class; we should be ready to consider case by case and concerned about finding out specific answers because of the peculiarities interjections display.

It is now time, however, for psychological tests that unveil if interjections really have an underlying conceptual basis. Researchers could probably administer questionnaires that explore if individuals associate specific expressive values to specific interjections in a constant fashion, if they connect particular interjections with very general notions related to certain emotions, feelings or attitudes and which those notions may be. Researchers could also ask informants to replace specific interjections in very specific contexts by others so as to investigate if the conceptual content of those interjections would be similar or if the possible substitutions affect the intended or perceived message. Additionally, other experiments could analyse if the encoding of a concept or a pro-concept is
accompanied by a particular mental activity, as well as if the fleshing out of schematic concepts is also accompanied by a corresponding mental activity.

If it could be empirically proved that interjections encoded some concept, we should be ready to revise their descriptions as non-truth conditional elements encoding procedural constraints on higher-level explicatures and admit that they are much closer to truth-conditional expressions, such as personal pronouns or some deictics that do not encode concepts, but pro-concepts, as well as procedures. Even if the dichotomy between conceptual and procedural expressions has been portrayed as a mutually exclusive one, some authors have commented that it should not be understood in this way, for there seems to be some type of conceptual content in elements traditionally considered procedural (see Fraser 2004, 2006, among others). Others have also shown that ‘conceptuality’ and ‘procedurality’ may be properties that change across time and as a language evolves (Padilla Cruz 2005; Bolly and Degand 2009; Curcó and Melis 2009). Accordingly, if there are linguistic elements that lose conceptual meaning and acquire a procedural one, and elements that lose their procedural nature and are no more functional in the linguistic system, it might be reasonable to postulate that interjections may move along the continuum procedural-conceptual.

A more radical possibility worth considering could be that interjections, as any other lexical item that apparently encodes a concept, may simply encode procedures that automatically trigger an instruction for constructing ad hoc specific concepts that capture what hearers take speakers to mean when using them (Wilson 2009). Within a view of the human mind as massively modular cognitive system consisting of a huge variety of special-purpose cognitive mechanisms adapted to regularities in particular domains (Sperber 2005), it could be reasonable to argue that all linguistic items, whether or not they really encode concepts, may first and foremost be procedural in the sense they activate specific procedures in the mind, such as to look for a specific referent, activate a concept, restrict a concept, establish some logical relationship between items of information, etc. According to Wilson (2009), such proposal would be advantageous in that it explains that interjections, like other lexical items, would just be pointers or pieces of evidence about what the speaker intends to express with them, regardless of whether or not they really encode concepts or pro-concepts.

Nonetheless, this proposal could further support the idea that there could be a continuum of cases between fully (pro-)conceptual and fully procedural interjections, and the possibility that interjections move along it across time and depending on their users. If interjections are only analysed as procedural expressions, this analysis should not exclude the possibility that some of them acquire some conceptual load, lose it or acquire a different one over history as a consequence of the procedures they regularly enact, which would make individuals activate a particular concept or different concepts at different times. This analysis
would also encompass the fact that there are more conceptual and less conceptual
interjections. It could be thought that, as a result of repeatedly activating the same
type of concept related to emotions, feelings or attitudes, interjections could start to
give direct access to those concepts and, therefore, encode them. Those
interjections lacking conceptual content would not systematically activate the same
type of emotional or attitudinal concept, but different types of concepts, so they
would not straightforwardly be associated with them and, consequently, would not
encode them on a regular basis. Probably, that those interjections encode concepts
may be just a matter of time and usage.

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