The genre specifics of English
\textit{wh}-exclamatives

Daniela Schröder
University of Münster

This paper puts forward the hypothesis that \textit{wh}-exclamatives in Present-day English are much more genre-specific than has previously been acknowledged. To test this, prototypical \textit{how}- and \textit{what}-exclamatives are searched for in three different corpora containing material from conceptually oral language, that is prose fiction, personal letters and informal, spontaneous face-to-face conversations. The results show that in terms of token frequency, \textit{wh}-exclamatives are most frequent in personal letters, a genre which has hitherto not been linked with exclamatives. Furthermore, the outcomes demonstrate that each genre shows a different distribution of exclamatives. In all cases, the different structural realizations (clausal vs. non-clausal form) can be connected to the function the exclamative fulfills in the respective genre and to the general properties of the three distinct text types. The results compel us to consider that exclamatives might be more specialized than has been believed so far.

Keywords: exclamatives, Present-day English, corpus linguistics, genre, discourse, oral language

1. Introduction

English exclamatives like \textit{How wonderfully he sings!} or \textit{What a dump!} have been an issue of considerable linguistic attention (for instance Castroviejo Miró 2008; D’Avis 2002; Elliot 1974; Grimshaw 1979; Heine \textit{et al.} 2020; McCawley 1973; Michaelis 2001; Michaelis & Lambrecht 1996; Rett 2011; Sadock & Zwicky 1985; Zanuttini & Portner 2003; Ziem & Ellsworth 2016). What is surprising, however, is that corpus studies on the empirical distribution of exclamatives in Present-day English largely still constitute a research void. To the best of my knowledge, only two studies on this topic have been conducted so far, namely Collins (2005) and Siemund (2015). Besides other findings, both papers mention in passing that exclamatives are more frequent in “registers marked by personal involvement
and informality” (Collins 2005:15) or that they are more common in “spoken language” (Siemund 2015) without further elaboration on the implications these findings have. However, as Schröder (in prep.) uncovers in her diachronic study of independent wh-exclamative clauses in the history of English, this particular type of exclamative has been highly sensitive to genre over the last five hundred years.¹ Her results show that, in terms of token frequency, main clause exclamatives occur most frequently in personal letters, a genre which has hitherto not been associated with exclamatives. Furthermore, she argues that the preference for certain text types can be explained by the function the exclamative has in that respective environment.

Therefore, the current study sets out from the general premise that contemporary exclamatives are also more genre-specific than has previously been acknowledged. In particular, it is hypothesized that the syntactic form of the exclamatives will vary according to the text type it is used in, reflecting both the different communicative roles the exclamative has and the general characteristics of the text types. In order to investigate this, three different types of wh-exclamatives in Present-day English have been searched for in three different corpora, each containing material from a different genre, namely spontaneous and informal face-to-face-conversations, prose fiction and letters.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the key syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features of wh-exclamatives. Section 3 introduces the methodology of the current study, the results of which are presented in Section 4. Section 5 offers an interpretation of the data and the final section provides a conclusion.

2. The syntax and semantics of exclamatives

The present study does not intend to contribute to the still ongoing discussion between exclamatives and their relationship to other sentence types. Instead, the ensuing analysis is built on the presupposition that an exclamative sentence type exists, which can be motivated independently from other sentence types. In what follows, only those aspects directly relevant for the present study have been included. The interested reader is referred to Michaelis (2001) and Heine et al. (2020: 210–214) for useful overviews.

1. The term genre is used and defined very differently in the various linguistic disciplines. For an overview see Taavitsainen (2016), where the terms genre, text type and register are distinguished. For the present purpose, however, such a distinction is not necessary, and hence the term genre will be used in a loose sense to refer to a variety of texts associated with differences in use, such as purpose, place or time.
Exclamatives form a structurally variegated class, both within and across languages (Michaelis 2001: 1038), but major reference grammars of English have established that wh-exclamatives are the prototypical type (Biber et al. 2007: 219; Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 853) because it is only in these clearly identifiable structures that exclamatory meaning is unambiguously conveyed. Put differently, in contrast to most other sentence types, these structures are monosemous in that they can only be used to express exclamations, even though they display a formal (and also semantic) overlap with interrogatives.

Exclamatives possess a number of features to be recapitulated in this section, which help us to delimit the class of wh-exclamatives under scrutiny here. Section 2.1 is concerned with the syntax of exclamatives while Section 2.2 pertains to the semantic and pragmatic aspects of exclamatory meaning.

2.1 The syntactic characteristics of wh-exclamatives

Despite their superficial similarity to interrogatives, English wh-exclamatives can only be formed with either an initial how or what, as these are the elements that can express degree (Collins 2005: 7). In contrast to interrogatives, the fronting of the wh-item is obligatory (What an idiot I’ve been! vs. *I’ve been what an idiot! but What did she do to you? She did what to you?) In addition, wh-exclamatives typically show declarative word order, as in How beautiful she is! Therefore, exclamatives generally do not show subject-verb inversion, although this is possible, for instance How stupid is he! However, as Collins (2005: 3) shows, inversion is empirically extremely rare, with only 0.9% of what-exclamatives and 1.3% of how-exclamatives showing reversal. Wh-exclamatives hence syntactically resemble declarative clauses rather than interrogative ones. Furthermore, exclamatives are what Heine et al. (2020: 213) call “syntactically unattached”, i.e., they cannot be embedded in a main clause as a complement. This last point has been discussed controversially in the literature, as some authors claim that sentences such as I can’t believe how much time has passed! constitute embedded exclamatives (Zanuttini & Portner 2003: 56) or indirect exclamatives (Michaelis 2001), among others. The viewpoint that exclamatives can be embedded is problematic because it presupposes that subordinate clauses can carry illocutionary force. Assigning illocutionary force to a dependent clause is surely a debatable stance as mainstream theories usually agree that only independent, that is main clauses, can carry illocutionary force (e.g., Hengeveld 2004: 1191, see also Heine et al. 2020; Schröder in prep.). Therefore, instances like these are not treated as exclamative clauses in the strict sense and are thus not included in the corpus search (in contrast to Collins 2005).
It has been empirically shown that exclamatives often occur in an elliptical form, meaning that the verbal component of the sentence is omitted and only the exclamative phrase is used, as in *What a nerd!* or *How wonderful!* The frequent reduction of said structures has been explained with a “low functional load” (Siemund 2015: 720) the full clause is said to carry. Very likely, a reduction is possible because, as Schröder (in prep.) shows, most verbs in the full clausal counterparts are copula verbs with little semantic contribution to the exclamatory meaning. In addition, as Siemund (2015: 721) remarks, reduction in general is common in spoken language. Since exclamatives have been demonstrated to occur in spoken language (to be specified below), the high rate of reduction can be explained with general preferences of the genre. The ensuing analysis will return to this point.

2.2 Semantic and pragmatic characteristics of *wh*-exclamatives

The semantic contribution of exclamations does not consist of a proposition, but in the affective response to it (Michaelis 2001: 1039). Therefore, exclamatives do not assert, but show a presupposed open proposition with a degree as the variable (Michaelis 2001: 1041). The affective response appears to be reducible to an often-mentioned scalar implicature that exclamatives are said to carry. For example, in saying *How tall Mary is!* a scale of tallness is introduced into the discourse that expresses that Mary is tall to a high degree. It is precisely this scalar implicature that is interpreted as the affective response (Siemund 2015: 703). Importantly, the judge of the situation is always the speaker, which has been taken as evidence that exclamatives by default display person deixis (Michaelis 2001: 1041). Arguably, we can even go further and state that exclamatives are inherently deictic and serve to direct the recipient’s attention to a certain object of surprise (Anna & Pfeiffer 2021; Pfeiffer 2016). Hence, exclamations always convey the affective stance of the speaker, which is often conceptualized in terms of surprise, meaning that a given situation is judged by the speaker to be unexpected. The more general meaning of exclamatives has been described in respect of non-canonicity (Michaelis 2001: 1039; Siemund 2015: 702). A noncanonical situation is one “whose absence a speaker would have predicted, based on a prior assumption or set of assumptions, e. g., a stereotype, a set of behavioral norms, or a model of the physical world” (Michaelis 2001: 1039).

In addition, exclamatives are “inherently factive” (Grimshaw 1979: 285) because the truth of the proposition is always presupposed (Abels 2010; Zanuttini & Portner 2003: 40). One consequence of the inherent factivity of exclamatives is that both the speaker and the hearer must know the subject referent. Accordingly, the referent on whom the scalar property is predicated is identifiable (Michaelis
2001:1041). From this follows that only definite NPs or pronominal NPs are acceptable as subjects in exclamatives.

Another factor related to the presupposed proposition of exclamatives is that of negation. It has been pointed out that exclamatives cannot be negated, as examples (1) and (2) demonstrate (adapted from Vialard 1989:13) because if they were negated, they would deny the proposition they simultaneously presuppose.

(1) *How tired she is not!
(2) *What a tall woman she is not!

In sum, wh-exclamatives are unified by their shared semantic-pragmatic properties, which entails that they show a presupposed open proposition, introduce a scalar implicature into the discourse, express expectation contravention accompanied by speaker affect and are speaker-deictic (see also Michaelis & Lambrecht 1996:378). Moreover, exclamatives are inherently factive, from which follows that the subject NP is known to both the speaker and the hearer and must be grammatically encoded accordingly. In addition, exclamatives cannot be denied.

These semantic aspects have an influence on the contexts in which exclamatives can be used. Along with the observation that exclamatives are often elliptical, the finding that exclamatives occur frequently in registers marked by personal involvement and informality (Collins 2005:15) or, more generally, in “spoken language” (Siemund 2015), is not surprising. In the same vein, the relatively high number of instances found in fictional texts as compared to other written registers (Collins 2005:15) can be explained with reference to features of said genre which has been shown to employ “many of the grammatical features that are common in face-to-face conversation” (Biber & Conrad 2009:135). Furthermore, since prose fiction with its narrative structure often is about unexpected or remarkable things and situations, exclamatives seem to be a suitable vehicle for conveying this unexpectedness (also Näf 1996:138). The following section will elaborate on this.

3. Methodology

Previous research has identified that exclamatives occur most frequently in spoken language (Siemund 2015), in fictional text (Collins 2005, Näf 1996) and personal letters (Schröder in prep.). The theoretical background to these findings is that in general, exclamatives are likely to occur in language which is characterized by a high degree of ‘orality’, a term which is not restricted here to the medium, but instead refers to a conceptualization of language. This section introduces a means of distinguishing different genres according to their degree of orality. The
outcomes clarify why exclamatives are likely to occur in the three specific genres, namely prose fiction, personal letters and informal, spontaneous face-to-face conversations and why they are thus suitable for the current study. In the second part of this section, the data source is described, and the process of data retrieval is explained.

3.1 Parameters of orality

A text moves along a conceptual continuum between orality and literacy, the endpoints of which correspond to language of immediacy and language of distance (Koch & Oesterreicher 1996). A written text can be conceptualized as oral if certain features, such as privacy, intimacy of the interlocutors or a strong emotional involvement are present. Table 1 summarizes the proposed parameters of communicative immediacy (Koch 1999: 400).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameters of communicative immediacy</th>
<th>Parameters of communicative immediacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(i) physical (spatial, temporal) immediacy</td>
<td>(ii) privacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iii) familiarity of the partners</td>
<td>(iv) high emotionality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(v) context embeddedness</td>
<td>(vi) deictic immediacy (immediate situation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(vii) dialogue</td>
<td>(viii) communicative cooperation of the interlocutors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ix) free topic development</td>
<td>(x) spontaneity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Physical immediacy (i) refers to the fact that the interlocutors are in a face-to-face situation, sharing the same physical space and the same temporal context (Biber & Conrad 2009: 87), which usually includes that what is talked about are elements of the immediate communicative situation (Koch & Oesterreicher 1985: 20). Thus, oral language is characterized by a context embeddedness (v) and a deictic immediacy (vi). Privacy (ii) can be said to be both a consequence of and a prerequisite for the physical immediacy in that the conversational partners are believed to know each other well. Related to this aspect is that of familiarity of the partners (iii). The basis of any successful communication is communicative coop-
eration between the interlocutors (viii), which implies that both discourse participants constantly negotiate the current roles each interlocutor takes (listener and speaker, for instance), which happens in (and leads to) a dialogic environment (vii). Furthermore, the interlocutors equally influence the process and the contents of the discourse (Koch & Oesterreicher 1985: 19–20), hence a typical face-to-face situation is marked by a high degree of spontaneity (x). Utterances are not carefully pre-planned because the communicative elements are produced in real time. This spontaneity also allows for a free topic development (ix), and more often than not, the interlocutors do not know in advance exactly how the communicative situation will develop. In addition, spontaneity is said to increase the likelihood of emotional elements in the discourse (Koch & Oesterreicher 1985: 21) because the participants are frequently concerned with their own feelings, likes or dislikes. They therefore express personal stance (Biber & Conrad 2009: 88).

Applying these parameters to different genres indicates that prose fiction, personal letters and informal, spontaneous face-to-face conversations contain many of the features associated with language of immediacy. Thus, it is not surprising that previous studies have reported a high number of exclamatives in the respective genres. Table 2 visualizes the ‘oral’ characteristics of personal letters, prose fiction and informal, spontaneous face-to-face conversation. A plus signals that the genre shows the respective parameter while a minus indicates a lack of it.

Table 2. Parameters of orality for the three genres

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Personal letters</th>
<th>Prose fiction</th>
<th>Informal, spontaneous face-to-face conversations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>physical immediacy</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>privacy</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>±</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>familiarity of the partners</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high emotionality</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>±</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>context embeddedness</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deictic immediacy</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dialogue</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td>communicative cooperation</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>free topic development</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spontaneity</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Any letter is physically distant because the addressee receives the letter after it has been written. The lack of physical immediacy is the reason why personal letters are neither contextually embedded nor deictically immediate. Moreover, a letter is monologic in nature, and thus lacks dialogic structure. Consequently, the degree of communicative cooperation is rather low. It is solely up to the writer to decide which topics are talked about and they are free to spontaneously introduce new topics into the discourse. The distinguishing feature of personal letters is that they are written to a person the writer knows well, i.e., with whom they are familiar, which leads to a high(er) degree of emotionality.

Prose fiction is also physically distant because the work is written well before the reader can consume it. Because the addressee is not an identifiable individual, but a mass readership, the extent of privacy is very low, as is the familiarity, simply because the writer can only broadly assume what their target readership will be. Thus, the communicative cooperation between author and reader is not one based on classical cooperative communication. In the same vein, prose fiction usually needs a verbalized context, so the context embeddedness is rather low. The same applies to deictic immediacy. The degree of emotionality essentially depends on what is written about and how it is presented: a novel containing a large proportion of direct speech and fictional dialogue is supposedly more emotional than a travel account of a heterodiegetic narrator because the representation of speech can be assumed to contain many aspects of conceptually oral language, a topic that will be returned to in Section 5 below. Finally, because any fictional work is carefully planned, there is no room for free topic development or spontaneity on the part of the writer.

The informal, spontaneous face-to-face conversations included here are characterized by (usually two) physically directly interacting interlocutors, who are familiar with each other and comfortable enough to allow for emotional elements in their dialogic conversations. The exchanges are contextually embedded and show a high degree of deictic immediacy. Topics can in principle develop spontaneously and the adherence to communicative cooperation will result in a successful exchange.

3.2 Data sources and collection of data

Data was obtained from the relevant subsections of the British National Corpus (BNC Consortium: 2007). As far as actual informal, spontaneous face-to-face conversations are concerned, all 153 texts coded S_conv have been included, which consist of orthographic transcriptions of unscripted informal, spontaneous conversations. The corpus of prose fiction contains all 485 texts with the code W_fict_prose. As for letters, all material labelled W_letters_personal was included.
in the corpus. Since the number of letters in the BNC is very small, with only about 55,000 words, the letter corpus was complemented by the Gutenberg Corpus as compiled by Schröder (2016). This newly created corpus consists of personal letters of the twentieth century freely available from the Project Gutenberg (www.gutenberg.org). Overall, the data base consists of just over 20 million words. Table 3 provides an overview of the three corpora used for the present purpose.

Table 3. Overview of the three corpora

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Data source</th>
<th>Tokens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prose fiction</td>
<td>BNC</td>
<td>16,673,799</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters</td>
<td>BNC</td>
<td>54,225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>Gutenberg Corpus</td>
<td>507,836</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>Gutenberg Corpus</td>
<td>507,836</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>Gutenberg Corpus</td>
<td>3,945,977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>BNC</td>
<td>21,181,837</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As becomes instantly obvious, the corpora are unbalanced with respect to their size. Since exclamatives have already been shown to occur relatively infrequently in language use (Siemund 2015), excluding material was not a desirable option as this would have further decreased the small corpus size. To compensate for the unequal number of tokens, all numbers provided below have been normalized to the respective corpus size.

Data were retrieved by two separate searches since the BNC is fully POS-tagged and the Gutenberg Corpus is solely available in plain text. Because only *what*- and *how*-exclamatives were of interest, the initial search has been restricted to these two lexemes. To keep the workload manageable, *what*-exclamatives have been confined to *what a*-exclamatives, i.e., those with a singular count noun. An example is provided in (3). Both Collins (2005) and Siemund (2015) have made

2. Project Gutenberg is a library of over 60,000 freely accessible eBooks. All material there is in the public domain, which means that the respective texts are at least 70 years old. The choice to include older material into the current study is subpar because it adds a diachronic dimension onto the synchronic perspective. However, the data from the BNC stems largely from the 1990s with some material even coming from the 1950s. Thus, the time difference is not as stark as it might appear at first glance. Supplementing the BNC data with other comparable data, for instance from the ICE-GB, does not provide a sufficiently large data base (the query only returned 9 exclamatives in total). For lack of better data, therefore, the advantage of a larger data base outweighs this potential shortcoming.
the same decision, so the results obtained here allow for a direct comparison with their outcomes.

(3) What a night it was!

Moreover, only non-subject *how*-exclamatives have been included, which can be further subdivided depending on the element the adverbial *how* is modifying. In the *how*-exclamatives that are investigated here, *how* modifies either the following adjective as in (4) or a verb, as in (5) (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 919).

(4) How tall they are!

(5) How they deceived her!

Formally, the following three structural realizations have been considered. Brackets indicate that the elements are optional and can be omitted.

(a) How + adjective (*How beautiful you are!*)
   $\text{How [ ]}_{\text{ADJ}} ([ ]_{\text{NP}} [ ]_{\text{VP}})$
(b) How + personal pronoun (*How I miss you!*)
   $\text{How PNP [ ]}_{\text{VP}} ([ ]_{\text{NP}})$
(c) What a + NP (*What a bookworm he is!*)
   $\text{What a/n [ ]}_{\text{NP}} ([ ]_{\text{NP}} [ ]_{\text{VP}})$

In the BNC, the search query consisted of the lexical *wh*-pronoun followed by the respective tag for (a) personal pronoun and (b) adjective. The Gutenberg Corpus only permitted lexeme-based searches. For *how*-exclamatives, the corpus was searched for all case-insensitive instances of the pronoun and the concordance list was cleaned manually. In the case of *what*, on the other hand, a further restriction was possible, namely the presence of the indefinite article, which was lexically determined as the two allomorphs *a* and *an*. Contra Siemund (2015), the exclamatives did not need to end with an exclamation point in either corpus, nor did the *wh*-element need to be capitalized, as otherwise all instances starting with interjections would have been missed. Naturally, these wider search parameters produced a lot of noise. With the help of regular expressions, the initial concordance list was cleansed from sentences containing the most frequently occurring embedding predicates like *see, think, look, wonder* and so forth, as exclamatives functioning as complements have been excluded (see above).

It is expected that exclamatives will occur most frequently in the genre characterized by the highest number of orality features. Hence, based on the overview presented in Table 2, we can assume that exclamatives occur most frequently in

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3. This is because these structures are unambiguously exclamative. The version in which the exclamative phrase is part of the subject can be equivocal with questions, as in *How much remains to be done?* There is no interrogative equivalent of the non-subject exclamative, e.g. *How she hated it?* The same applies to the *what a*-exclamatives, e.g. *What strange people inhabit these parts?*
informal, spontaneous face-to-face conversations, followed by letters and prose fiction. It is further hypothesized that the three different genres favor different syntactic exclamative realizations, with shorter structures anticipated to occur more frequently in medi ally spoken language, viz. informal, spontaneous face-to-face conversations, and longer structures primarily appearing in the two medi ally written genres. To this end, the various forms have been classified in a purely data-driven, bottom-up fashion. Except for one occurrence, all data could be categorized into one of the following five syntactic realizations. Sentences (6) through (10) provide examples of the respective form.

1. Main clause exclamative

(6) “What a useful boy you are, darling,” she said softly, “Good at all sorts of things.” (BNC Fiction, A0D)

2. Inverted exclamative

(7) It is my first trip on the Mississippi, and I am greatly interested in it. How wonderful in its rapidity of movement has been the history of our country, compared with the history of the old world. (Gutenberg Corpus, Roosevelt)

3. Verbless exclamative phrase

(8) Yes, it’s your turn. Oh how boring. How boring terribly. (BNC Conversation, KBG)

4. Verbless exclamative phrase postmodified by finite clause

(9) What a shame you didn’t see it. You’d have enjoyed it. (BNC Fiction, CA3)

5. Verbless exclamative phrase postmodified by infinitive clause

(10) Thank God for cathedrals! How splendid of Litlin, to be getting Bunny taught reels. (Gutenberg Corpus, Letters to Helen)

4. Results

The corpus search returned 3,178 tokens in total, which is a significantly higher number of exclamatives than in either Collins (2005) or Siemund (2015), despite the relatively small corpus size. Very likely, this is due to the more generous search

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4. One instance found in the Prose Fiction Corpus was a subjunctive, provided in (i):

(i) And taken his soul – how sad be this strife! (BNC Fiction, A0D)
parameters. Out of these tokens, 1,438 instances are how-exclamatives (45%) and 1,740 occurrences constitute what a-exclamatives (55%). In accordance with previous research, the numbers show that wh-exclamatives predominantly occur in non-clausal form. While just slightly more than one third of all instances are clausal ones (main clause and inverted exclamatives), almost two thirds of all occurrences appear in ‘reduced’ form (verbless exclamative phrases, verbless exclamative phrase postmodified by finite clause, verbless exclamative phrase postmodified by infinitive clause). Considering the two different types of wh-exclamatives, the numbers further indicate that the non-clausal forms are more common with the what a-exclamatives than the how-exclamatives. Almost three quarters of what a-exclamatives (74%) are elliptical realizations, while the differences are less pronounced with how-exclamatives. With 52%, the elliptical how-exclamatives are only marginally more frequent than their full clausal counterparts. We need to keep in mind, however, that of the two different forms of how-exclamatives, only the type How + Adjective can be reduced. Exclamatives in which the initial how is followed by a personal pronoun subject cannot be shortened, see e.g. *How he! Thus far, the numbers largely corroborate previous findings reported by Siemund (2015) and Collins (2005), who also found that exclamatives occur more frequently in non-clausal form and that reduction is more customary with what-exclamatives than with how-exclamatives.

Turning now to the expected differences of occurrences between the three genres, the outcomes suggest that there are indeed dissimilarities between prose fiction, letters and conversation. Normalized to instances per five hundred thousand words, the frequencies show that wh-exclamatives are most common in letters, where they appear 92.51 times per five hundred thousand words of running text, followed by prose fiction with an occurrence rate of 75.66. Surprisingly, wh-exclamatives are least frequent in informal, spontaneous face-to-face conversation, where they occur 69.82 times per five hundred thousand words. The different rates of occurrence between the three genres are statistically significant ($\chi^2(2) = 2881.59, p < 0.01, V=0.95$, with implemented Yates correction). Therefore, the data reveal that, in terms of token frequency, wh-exclamatives are most frequently found in letters, followed by prose fiction. In contrast to what has been hypothesized above, exclamatives are least frequent in actual face-to-face convers-

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5. As pointed out by one reviewer, since some data points come from the same corpus file, this means that they are not independent, thereby rendering the chi-square test problematic. Although an analysis based on the indiscriminate aggregate of data points violates the test’s independence assumption, the application of chi-square tests in the present context seems nonetheless permissible since the study, first of all, seeks to identify mere tendencies in the use of exclamatives, but subsequent work would, of course, need to account for potential sources of non-independence, possibly as random effects in a model-based approach.
sations. These results are partly unexpected and require an explanation. Moreover, there are further differences between the three genres, as Table 4 demonstrates.

Table 4. Occurrences of exclamatives per genre and syntactic form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Main clause</th>
<th>Reverse</th>
<th>Verbless</th>
<th>Exclamative + finite</th>
<th>Exclamative + infinitive</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Letters</td>
<td>69 (66.3%)</td>
<td>3 (2.9%)</td>
<td>22 (21.2%)</td>
<td>4 (3.8%)</td>
<td>6 (5.8%)</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prose fiction</td>
<td>964 (38.2%)</td>
<td>31 (1.2%)</td>
<td>1170 (46.4%)</td>
<td>100 (4.0%)</td>
<td>258 (10.2%)</td>
<td>2523</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneous informal conversation</td>
<td>60 (10.9%)</td>
<td>4 (0.7%)</td>
<td>458 (83.1%)</td>
<td>4 (0.7%)</td>
<td>25 (4.5%)</td>
<td>551</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,093 (34.4%)</td>
<td>38 (1.2%)</td>
<td>1650 (51.9%)</td>
<td>108 (3.4%)</td>
<td>289 (9.1%)</td>
<td>3,178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among other things, it is noticeable that in conversations, about 70% of occurrences are what a-exclamatives whereas in both prose fiction and letters the ratio between how- and what-a-exclamatives is almost evenly distributed.

As far as letters are concerned, out of the 104 instances that were retrieved, 60 are how-exclamatives (58%) and 44 are what a-exclamatives (42%). It is noticeable that 69% of all exclamatives are clausal ones and less than a third are non-clausal ones, which is in stark opposition to the overall distribution of exclamatives, where the non-clausal form constitutes the vast majority.

As becomes clear from Table 4, the preferred option in letters to express exclamatory force is a main clause exclamative, followed by verbless structures. Examples (11) and (12) demonstrate these two uses. The other syntactic possibilities are rarely used.

(11) It is a tough noviciate [sic] but a real one; and all the dark and humiliation (but what a lot of light and love there is with it too) is the shadow and tension which must come with God’s direct dealing with the soul.
    (Gutenberg Corpus, Underhill)

(12) Richard, 43, teaches in Telford and his one son attends “the University of Central England” (what a mouthful).
    (BNC, KAR)

In addition, the inspection of the data reveals that there are also differences between the distribution of the two types of exclamatives. Close to 90% of how-exclamatives are clausal ones. With what a-exclamatives, on the other hand, a little less than half (48%) are clausal and 52% constitute non-clausal realizations.
Therefore, the general tendency that reduction is more common in *what*-exclamatives is not visible in letters. All findings are in marked opposition to the overall empirical distribution of exclamatives. Section 5 will return to this.

Concerning prose fiction, the query yielded 2,524 tokens. Of these, 48% (1229) are *how*-exclamatives and 52% are *what a*-exclamatives. With respect to their syntactic behavior, the numbers show that about 40% are clausal realizations and the other 60% occur in non-clausal form. Table 4 demonstrates that structures without any verbal component are the most frequent option to which fiction writers revert, closely followed by main clause exclamatives. One in every ten exclamatives consists of the verbless exclamative phrase postmodified by an infinitive clause. Examples (13) through (15) below illustrate the respective usage.

(13) “Dorothy! *What an extraordinary surprise!* How are you?” (BNC, A0F)

(14) Blindly she moved back to her desk again, to the neat pages she had been stacking when Rob had come into the room. *What an age ago that now seemed.* (BNC, HA7)

(15) *What an odd thing to say,* Carrie thought. But Mr Evans was looking at Nick with a certain, grudging respect. (BNC, EFJ)

Regarding the distinction between *how-* and *what*-exclamatives and their structural variations, the data reveal that *how*-exclamatives occur almost as often in clausal form (49%) as in non-clausal form (51%). The picture is eminently different from *what*-exclamatives, where 70% occur in reduced forms.

Finally, the corpus search for conversation yielded 551 tokens, consisting of 396 *what a*-exclamatives (72%) and 155 *how*-exclamatives (28%). Pertaining to the various syntactic patterns displayed in Table 4, the outcomes show that the bulk of exclamatives, namely 88%, occur in non-clausal form. Correspondingly, only 12% are used in a full clause. The numbers illustrate that verbless structures by far are the most frequently occurring realizations. About every tenth instance is a main clause exclamative. None of the other options are really exploited. Sentence (16) contains an example of one of the many verbless exclamatives and (17) illustrates the main clause use.

(16) Good. <pause> So <pause> *how boring.* It’s not funny. (BNC, KBH)

(17) Whoops! <pause> *What a culinary delight this is.* (BNC, KPN)

The rate of non-clausal and clausal forms in *how-* and *what*-exclamatives is almost the same. In both cases, more than 85% of all instances are non-clausal exclamatives.

The results for face-to-face conversations corroborate the findings reported in Siemund (2015) that elliptical exclamatives are the most prevailing form in this
register. Unlike in the other two genres, how- and what-exclamatives are equally frequently reduced. Furthermore, what a-exclamatives are much more token-frequent than how-exclamatives, a finding that is also unique for this genre.

In summary, the outcomes of the corpus search have shown that there are indeed great differences between the three genres. To begin with, wh-exclamatives are most frequent in letters, followed by prose fiction. Somewhat unexpectedly, they are least frequent in actual informal, spontaneous conversation. When scrutinizing each genre individually, further differences become apparent. In letters, the majority of instances are full clausal realizations, an observation that is not found in any of the other two genres. In addition, what a-exclamatives are reduced in about half of the instances, while the greater part of how-exclamatives are clausal ones. In contrast, the data for prose fiction show that almost two thirds of occurrences are non-clausal ones. Interestingly, out of the five syntactic options that have been found in the corpus, the majority of instances are completely verbless, but main clause realizations are closely behind. What a-exclamatives are reduced much more often than their how-counterpart. Yet another picture emerges in conversations. Not only do what a-exclamatives outnumber how-exclamatives in terms of token frequency, but the analysis of the different structures shows a dominance of verbless structures, which is almost equally frequent in both how- and what a-exclamatives. Thus, there is evidence for the initial hypothesis that wh-exclamatives are sensitive to genre and show different empirical patterns in them. Despite the undeniable differences between the three genres, a commonality seems to be that across genres most instances are either main clause exclamatives or completely verbless structures. The other syntactic options (subject-verb reversal, verbless exclamative phrase postmodified by finite clause, verbless exclamative phrase postmodified by infinitive clause) are theoretically possible, but empirically extremely rare. The outcomes of the analysis can be conceptualized in terms of a continuum showing the interrelationship between the genre the exclamative occurs in and the syntactic form it is most likely to take (see Figure 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>clausal</th>
<th>non-clausal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>letters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conversation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Relationship between the syntactic form of exclamatives and the genre
5. Discussion

The results obtained from the current investigation require an explanation. In particular, it needs to be determined why exclamatives are (in relative terms) most token-frequent in letters and why main clause exclamatives are the favored type of expressing exclamations there. In addition, the occurrences in prose fiction should be more closely inspected, as other studies (Brinton 2014; Schröder in prep.) have suggested that exclamatives occur predominantly in fictional representation of speech. If this is the case, the high number of verbless instances found there may be due to the fact that writers may try to copy actual conversation. Finally, it is worthwhile to consider potential reasons for the frequent reduction to just the exclamative phrase in conversation. The following paragraphs address each of these aspects in turn.

Regarding the token frequencies in correspondence, similar to what Schröder (in prep.) argues, the high number of occurrences in letters can be explained by the discourse functions exclamatives fulfill. Although there seems to be little agreement on the precise contributions exclamatives make to discourse (see for instance Castroviejo Miró 2008; Chernilovskaya et al. 2012), one largely uncontroversial observation is that exclamatives create a biased context (Castroviejo Miró 2008:57). This bias is grounded in two situational facts.

First, the speaker is always the judge of the situation—the expressive content of *wh*-exclamatives cannot be challenged by the addressee (Chernilovskaya et al. 2012:115). While the descriptive content of a *wh*-exclamative like (18) can be disputed (*He gave a wonderful presentation*), the expressive content (*I am surprised/amazed by that fact*) cannot. In addition, the content of the *wh*-exclamative cannot be challenged as a lie (Chernilovskaya et al. 2012:116); consequently, the addressee has to assume the speaker’s sincerity. Therefore, a sentence such as (18) forces the addressee to accept the speaker’s evaluation of the situation.

(18) What a wonderful presentation he gave!

Second, exclamatives can be confirmed by the addressee by using confirmation moves such as ‘indeed’ or ‘yes’. In this sense, exclamatives allow reversed polarity tags (*What a tragedy it was, wasn’t it!*)—but not constant polarity tags (*What a tragedy it was, was it!*)—because the backgrounded statement component is usually presented as uncontroversial (Huddleston & Pullum 2002:922). If such items occur, they indicate that the responder shares the speaker’s attitude rather than just confirming the descriptive or expressive content (Chernilovskaya et al. 2012:113). As an example, consider the exchange in (19).
A: I really liked Prof. Smith’s lecture.

B. Yes, me too.

B’s response is not meant to signal that B has independent evidence for A’s claim that they liked Prof. Smith’s lecture, but rather that B agrees with A’s point that the lecture was good (Chernilovskaya et al. 2012: 113).

The discourse imbalance between the producer and the recipient seems to apply to all monologic genres, especially when we believe Wiltschko (2021: 115) that, strictly speaking, exclamatives can be uttered felicitously without any interlocutor. It stands to reason that this bias would therefore be most pronounced in prose fiction since the reader does not have any means to respond to the text and cooperation between the writer and the reader is not technically required. However, as the data show, this is not the case. Therefore, the frequent use of exclamatives in letters must be premised on other reasons. In contrast to prose fiction, it can be assumed that the writer of a personal letter expects and wants their addressee to reply (albeit with a temporal delay). The use of an exclamative coerces the recipient to share the writer’s assessment of the situation, the subject of the exclamative. Under this reading, the exclamative may function as a request for confirmation that the recipient shares the speaker’s attitude and, contra Wiltschko (2021), may very well serve to initiate a move. Trotzke’s (2019) study that exclamative clauses can in fact be followed by a (weak) denial indicates that exclamatives may be more addressee-oriented than previously thought. For want of letters that would provide the anticipated response, this question has to remain unresolved here.

To better understand the use of exclamatives in letters we also have to look at the marked preference for main clause syntax in personal correspondence. Notwithstanding the many oral features that personal letters undoubtedly possess, letters are nonetheless a written medium. Precisely this mode of production may be the reason why main clause exclamatives are especially frequent in this genre because only a written medium can tolerate such a highly emotionally charged construction in full sentential form. As has been shown, speech is typically constrained in the linguistic characteristics it employs, while the writing mode permits a wider range of linguistic expressions (Biber & Conrad 2009: 261). Typical features of spoken language are reduced surface structures and a generally fragmented production of text (Biber 1988: 106). In contrast, writing makes use of more complex syntactic structures. With respect to exclamatives this means that shorter exclamatives are more appropriate for actual spoken language (i.e., speech) while the full main clause forms are more likely to occur in writing which, crucially, must be characterized by a high degree of orality. Letters with their written mode and their conceptual orality therefore provide an ideal communicative
situation for main clause exclamatives. Hence, it is the combination of full sentential syntax and the biased context exclamatives always introduce that seems to make them so prominent in personal correspondence.

As regards the occurrences of exclamatives in prose fiction, the data were analyzed according to the contexts in which the instances appeared in order to arrive at a more detailed picture. The numbers show that it is indeed the case that 99% (2,500 out of 2,523) of all tokens are used to represent speech and inner thoughts in the fictional work, which is in line with what both Brinton (2014) and Schröder (in prep.) report (also see Charleston 1960: 49). Thus, it is fair to conclude that wh-exclamatives in prose fiction are used almost exclusively in imitated spoken language. Exclamatives in this particular genre thus seem to have a very specific function, which is to verbalize a character’s consciousness and serving as a resource for portraying a character (emotions, stance towards something and so forth).

The data can be further categorized into the different ways of portraying speech in a fictional work. It can be differentiated whether the speech is direct, meaning that it occurs in quotation marks and is uttered aloud by the fictional character, or indirect, i.e., unspoken interior language as in inner monologues, for instance. Applying this classification system to the data at hand uncovers that 40% of the instances occur in direct speech, as exemplified by (20) and the other 60% are used in indirect speech, illustrated by (21).

(20) “Yes,” Robyn replied sweetly. “How clever of you to work it out. It broke down.”

(BNC, HGT)

(21) What a fool I am, thought Mrs. Fanshawe. I feel exactly as if I were having a very prolonged dream but every time I come out of it I’m so tired I fall back into it again.

(BNC, A73)

When it comes to the possible syntactic variants, we see that they are used to different extents in the two ways of represented speech. As can be deduced from Table 5, non-clausal realizations of the exclamatives prevail in direct speech while the clausal variants form the majority in indirect speech, although the two clausal variants in the latter case are much more evenly distributed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Direct speech</th>
<th>Indirect speech</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clausal</td>
<td>Non-clausal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>416 (27.55%)</td>
<td>1094 (72.45%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. (Non-)clausal realizations in the different representations of speech
Comparing the numbers for direct speech with the data gained for actual face-to-face conversations, in which about 88% of all occurrences are of a non-clausal nature, it becomes visible that the distributions show similar tendencies. In both cases, non-clausal exclamatives constitute the overwhelming majority, although clausal choices are almost twice as high in fictional direct speech than in actual conversation. Table 6 details the occurrences of each of the five syntactic variants found in direct speech representation.

Table 6. Distribution of exclamatives in direct speech

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Main clause</th>
<th>Reverse</th>
<th>Verbless</th>
<th>Exclamative + finite</th>
<th>Exclamative + infinitive</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>406 (26.91%)</td>
<td>9 (0.60%)</td>
<td>880 (58.32%)</td>
<td>52 (3.45%)</td>
<td>162 (10.74%)</td>
<td>1509</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From this data we can infer that while verbless structures predominate in use, they are by far not as frequently exploited as in actual conversations. Recall that in conversations, more than 80% of all exclamatives occurred in verbless use. Likewise, the comparatively high number of main clause exclamatives is not mirrored in authentic spoken language.

When considering the data for indirect speech representations, it is striking that the distribution of exclamative types is similar to that of personal letters. Table 7 displays the five syntactic variants found in indirect fictional speech.

Table 7. Distribution of exclamatives in indirect speech

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Main clause</th>
<th>Reverse</th>
<th>Verbless</th>
<th>Exclamative + finite</th>
<th>Exclamative + infinitive</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>545 (55.05%)</td>
<td>20 (2.02%)</td>
<td>288 (29.09%)</td>
<td>48 (4.84%)</td>
<td>89 (8.99%)</td>
<td>990</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As in personal correspondence, the majority of instances are main clause exclamatives, followed by verbless exclamative phrases. The similarities likely have to do with similar functions of both modes: arguably, letters as well as indirect representations of speech primarily serve to express the inner state of a single individual in a written mode. In the case of letters this individual is the writer, while in prose fiction it refers to the character or the narrator (sometimes through a character).

Overall, fiction writers, consciously or not, seem to have authentic means of speech representations in mind as far as direct modes of exclaiming are concerned. They appear only partly successful in this endeavor, since they use the typical verbless structures less often than their actual occurrences in speech would
suggest. Instead, more main clause exclamatives and constructions with sentential complements are employed, which can be attributed once again to the different modes of production: writing simply requires more sentential structures than actual spoken language. Not surprisingly, this distinction is reflected in exclamatives as well.

The deliberations of the preceding paragraphs directly lead us to the last aspect to be discussed, the preponderance of verbless exclamative phrases in informal, spontaneous face-to-face conversations. As has been stated above, speech in general is restrained in the linguistic characteristics it employs (Biber & Conrad 2009: 261). Therefore, shorter exclamatives, i.e., verbless exclamative phrases, are to be expected in medially spoken language. As such, the frequently encountered ellipsis of the verbal part of the exclamative may simply mirror general trends present in speech.

Furthermore, it is possible that the role of deixis has not been taken sufficiently into account thus far. As Pfeiffer (2016) has argued for German *wh*-exclamatives, which are both semantically and structurally similar to their English equivalents, exclamatives are inherently deictic utterances in that they direct the recipient’s attention to a certain object (or subject) of surprise. According to him, exclamatives are anchored in the here and now of the immediate environment, implying that they can refer either to a visual perception in the immediate environment or to what has been said before, the latter of which he calls “anaphoric deixis” (Pfeiffer 2016: 39). Importantly, this only seems to apply to exclamatives used in conversations, which explains why verbless constructions are preferred: the object is visually or referentially perceivable in the environment of both speaker and hearer. Any more linguistic material is simply not needed to convey the message (also Pfeiffer 2016: 43). By contrast, in the written genres, as Section 3 has demonstrated, the lack of deictic immediacy needs compensation. One such way of counterbalancing missing environmental cues is using more syntactic information, most notably the expression of a verb. Therefore, the full clausal *wh*-exclamatives are reserved for use in written genres. Bearing the previous paragraphs in mind, the distribution of exclamatives can now be captured by a refined version of the continuum introduced in Section 4 above. Figure 2 visualizes the interdependence of the syntactic form of the exclamative and the genre in which it occurs.

To sum up this section, the analysis of the data at hand strongly suggests that the diverging distributional patterns of *wh*-exclamatives in the three different genres can only be reasonably explained when both the characteristics of each genre are considered as well as the communicative purposes the respective exclamative serves. It was shown that in each text type, the form the exclamative takes follows both the function the exclamative has and the general features of the genre. In
conclusion, the different syntactic patterns do not accidentally correlate with the
genre the exclamative occurs in.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>clausal</th>
<th>non-clausal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>letters</td>
<td>indirect speech (prose)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2.** Continuum of *wh*-exclamatives in English genres with respect to form and genre

6. Conclusion

The initial hypothesis that *wh*-exclamatives in Present-day English are highly sen-
sitive to genre has been confirmed. All evidence accumulated in the corpus study
of *wh*-exclamatives in three different genres points towards the view that the
observed differences between occurrences in letters, prose fiction and face-to-face
conversations are not arbitrary, but rather due to the specific functions the respec-
tive exclamative has in that particular text type. Besides reflecting general fea-
tures of the genres they occur in, *wh*-exclamatives appear more specialized than
previously thought: in letters, exclamatives appear to function as a request for
confirmation of the speaker’s evaluation, in prose fiction, exclamatives are almost
exclusively used in direct and indirect speech while showing different syntactic
patterns than in actual conversations, where speakers mostly use verbless exclama-
tives and make extensive use of deictic cues.

Naturally, the present study is only a first step towards shining a light on the
interrelationship between text type and exclamatives. In addition to the quantita-
tive nature of the data reported here, it would be interesting to complement this
study by a more qualitatively oriented analysis of exclamatives, especially with
respect to their pragmatic characteristics. In particular, it would be interesting to
determine whether exclamatives can indeed function as move-initiating contribu-
tions to a discourse. If not, the frequent use in letters must be based on other, yet
unidentified reasons.

References


Address for correspondence

Daniela Schröder
University of Münster
Münster, 48143
Germany
daniela.schroeder@uni-muenster.de
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0931-5490

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