

## Boy! Is Syntax Easy!

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## 0. Introduction

In his dissertation entitled "The Grammar of Emotive and Exclamatory Sentences in English" (1971, Ohio State), Dale Elliot pointed out that so far surprisingly little attention has been paid to the study of exclamatory sentences by generative grammarians. The major claim of Elliot's work was that not only do exclamatory sentences in English exhibit unique syntactic properties but also the study of these sentences has something to say about a particular aspect of the relationship between syntax and semantics. The essential goal of this paper is to further justify those claims made by Elliot.

## I. Exclamatory-Inversion Sentences

Consider the following examples.

- (1) Is syntax easy?
- (2) Am I hungry?
- (3) Does she have beautiful legs?

If we ignore the distinctive falling intonation for the moment, (1)-(3) look exactly like Yes/No questions. However, unlike Yes/No questions, they do not seek information from the hearer. It seems their semantic contents are approximately equivalent to (1)'-(3)' or (1)"-(3)".

- (1)' How easy syntax is!
- (2)' How hungry I am!
- (3)' What beautiful legs she has!
- (1)" Syntax is so easy!
- (2)" I am so hungry!
- (3)" She has such beautiful legs!

Sentences like (1)'-(3)' have traditionally been treated as exclamatory sentences. Let's call sentences like (1)-(3) Exclamatory-Inversion S's and (1)'-(3)' Wh-Exclamatory S's.

Despite his insightful analyses of other exclamatory expressions in English, Elliot touched on Exclamatory-Inversion S's only in passing and concluded that "in general any Yes/No questions in English can be used not only as a 'real' question, asking for information, but also as an exclamation". The same claim was made by Jerry Sadock in his paper "Queclaratives". In this paper, he maintained that the "morphological question"

- (4) Is syntax easy?

can be used in two distinct senses: one is a real question and

the other is a negative assertion semantically equivalent to a tag question such as (5), which he christened "queclaratives".

(5) Syntax isn't easy, is it?

He further observed that "the uttering of this S can have the effect of an assertion 'syntax is easy'." However, "only 'negative assertion' reading has grammatical consequences, but 'positive assertion' is merely a consequence of their asking and some non-linguistic factors." Thus, for Elliot and Sadock, the relation of Yes/No questions and Exclamatory-Inversion S's are very much like that of (6) and (7).

(6) It's cold in here.

(7) Please close the window.

Notice that in order for it to be appropriate to infer (7) from (6), first of all, one has to understand the literal meaning of (6). But just what is the semantic relation between Yes/No questions and Exclamatory-Inversion S's? So far as I can see, there is none whatsoever. In addition to this, note that the time and the place of the utterance, and the interpersonal relationship between the speaker and the hearer are also crucial factors in inferring (7) from (6), whereas such is not the case with the relationship (if any) between (1) and a corresponding question.

In the following, I am going to argue that the Elliot-Sadock position cannot be justified and that Exclamatory-Inversion S's must be analyzed as something entirely different from Yes/No questions.

## II. 14 Characteristics of Exclamatory-Inversion S's

E-I S's behave differently from Y/N questions in at least 14 significant ways. The first two were discovered by Elliot.

II. 1. the falling intonation

II. 2. the use of interjections

Elliot observed that E-I S's are typically pronounced with a falling intonation as compared with a rising intonation of Y/N questions. Also, he noticed that the use of interjection such as Boy, Wow, My, etc. is limited to exclamations, and is not possible with questions. So for example, (8)-(9) are definitely ill-formed.

(8) \*Boy, is syntax easy

(9) \*Gee, does she have beautiful legs

12 more characteristics are to follow.

II. 3. delicious

For many speakers of English, delicious is not allowed in

questions such as (10)-(11). However, the corresponding E-I S's are perfectly good.

- (10) \*Can you make delicious coffee?  
(cf. Can you make that delicious coffee you used to make for me?)
- (10)' Boy, can you make delicious coffee!
- (11) \*Is this cookie delicious?
- (11)' Mv. is this cookie delicious!

## II. 4. emotive adjectives

Emotive adjectives such as appalling, outrageous, etc. do not seem to occur comfortably in Y/N questions. But E-I S's allow them.

- (12) Is it outrageous that we pay so much for meat {\*?}
- (13) Is it appalling that I have to put up with nonsense like this {\*?}

## II. 5. intensifiers

The use of intensifiers is quite free in Y/N questions but mysteriously enough, E-I S's do not allow intensifiers. Compare:

- (14) Is syntax {  $\emptyset$  } easy?  
 { very  
 quite  
 extremely  
 that }
- (14)\* Is syntax {  $\emptyset$  } easy?  
 { \*very  
 \*quite  
 \*extremely  
 \*that }

II. 6. the two ever's<sup>1</sup>

Dale Terbeek has pointed out to me that ever can occur in both questions and E-I S's as in (15)-(15)'.

- (15) Is syntax ever easy?  
(15)' Is syntax ever easy!

However, note that ever in (15) and (15)' do not mean the same thing. Ever in questions mean something like 'at any time', while ever in E-I S's mean something like 'really and truly'. This semantic difference of the two ever's have immediate syntactic consequences. For instance:

- (16) Is your mother ever young { \*? }  
 (17) Is Harry ever tall { \*? }  
 (18) Does she ever have beautiful legs { \*? }

Since properties such as being young, being tall and having legs are enduring properties, (16)-(18) are anomalous questions unless one lives in a world in which those properties are something that fluctuate. Second, Bill Cantrall has pointed out that one can repeat ever in E-I S's, but not in Y/N questions as in (19)-(19)'.

- (19) Boy, am I ever ever hungry!  
 (19)' \*Have you ever ever read Shakespeare?

Third, Bill Darden has called my attention to the fact that the negative marker not can occur in E-I S's as in (21).

- (20) You aren't hungry, are you?  
 (21) Boy, am I { ever not } hungry!  
                   { \*not ever }  
                   { \*never }

Now, compare (21) with (22).

- (22) Are you { ever not } hungry?  
                   { \*not ever }  
                   { never }

Notice that the contraction form never does not occur in E-I S's, while it does occur in questions.

## II. 7. negatives

It is well-known that Wh-Exclamatory S's do not tolerate the negative marker not, as in (23)-(24).

- (23) \*How easy syntax isn't!  
 (24) \*What beautiful legs she doesn't have!

Since not may occur in E-I S's as in (21), one might argue that E-I S's behave quite differently from Wh-Exclamatory S's with regard to negatives. However, this difference seems to be very superficial. For one thing, recall that in E-I S's never may not occur. Also, notice that there are no negative E-I S's, although there are negative Y/N questions. Consider:

- (25) \*Boy, isn't syntax easy! = Syntax isn't easy at all.  
 (26) \*My, doesn't she have beautiful legs! = She doesn't have beautiful legs at all.

## II. 8. comparatives &amp; superlatives

Both comparatives and superlatives may not occur in E-I S's.

- (27) Is syntax as easy as phonology { ? }  
 { \*! }  
 (28) Is syntax easier than phonology { ? }  
 { \*! }  
 (29) Is she the prettiest girl in your class { ? }  
 { \*! }

## II. 9. auxiliaries

Claudia Corum has pointed out that can in E-I S's only means 'able'. Thus, the 'possible' reading is impossible in (30).

- (30) Boy, can he ever swim! = He is a superb swimmer.

Also, as Larry Horn has pointed out, the auxiliaries must, may and ought may not occur in E-I S's. Needless to say, there is no such restriction in Y/N questions.

## II. 10. the definite subject

Both definite and indefinite subjects may occur in Y/N questions. But E-I S's only allow definite subjects, generic included. Compare:

- (31) Are {  $\emptyset$  } Swedes industrious?  
           { some }  
           { any }  
 (31)' Are {  $\emptyset$  } Swedes industrious!  
           { \*some }  
           { \*any }  
 (32) Does { Monica } love Jerry?  
           { that girl }  
           { someone }  
           { anyone }  
 (32)' Does { Monica } love Jerry!  
           { that girl }  
           { \*someone }  
           { \*anyone }

Notice that one can exclaim,

- (32)" Boy, does someone love Jerry!

However, the speaker knows who someone is and so (32)" has a definite subject. Compare (32)" with (33), which is ungrammatical.

- (33) \*Boy, does someone or other love Jerry!

## II. 11. quantifiers

Any quantifier is allowed to modify the object NP in Y/N questions, but that is not the case with E-I S's. Compare (34)-(34)'.

(34) Does she have  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \emptyset \\ \text{some} \\ \text{any} \\ \text{many} \\ \text{five} \end{array} \right\}$  children?

(34)' Does she have  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} *\emptyset \\ *\text{some} \\ *\text{any} \\ \text{many} \\ *\text{five} \end{array} \right\}$  children?

Note that  $\emptyset$  and some are all right, if (34)' is used as an answer to a question as in the following.

(35) A: Does she have  $\emptyset$  children?

B: Boy, does she have  $\emptyset$  children?

(36) A: Does she have some children?

B: Boy, does she have some children?

The immediate reaction of speaker A to B would be "What's so unusual about her children?" or something. Any is not allowed in the exclamatory sentence. Compare (35)-(36) with (37).

(37) A: Does she have any children?

B: \*Boy, does she have any children!

## II. 12. appositives

Arnold Zwicky has pointed out that E-I S's allow appositives, while Y/N questions do not as in (38).

(38) Does Harry have a car, namely a Rolls Royce  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} *? \\ ! \end{array} \right\}$

## II. 13. sentence-conjoining

E-I S's and Y/N questions behave differently with regard to sentence-conjoining. Compare:

(39) Are you hungry or are you not hungry?

(39)' \*Boy, am I hungry or am I not hungry!

The following examples are due to Georgia Green.

(40) \*Are you hungry or are you hungry?

(40)' Am I hungry or am I hungry!

## II. 14. the NP extraposition rule

Elliot has discovered that English has a rule to relate pairs of S's like (41)-(41)'. He called it the rule of NP extraposition.

(41) The price you pay for meat is awful.

(41)' It's awful the price you pay for meat.

He further observed that the application of this rule is strictly restricted to the emotive predicates. So for example, (42)' is ungrammatical.

(42) The price he pays for meat is unknown.

(42)' \*It's unknown the price he pays for meat.

He noticed that this rule does not apply in negative declaratives and positive questions as shown by (43)-(44).

(43) \*It isn't awful the price you pay for meat.

(44) \*Is it awful the price you pay for meat?

Compare (44) with (44)', which is a perfectly good sentence.

(44)' Is it awful the price you pay for meat!

Thus, the NP extraposition rule in English treats E-I S's and Y/N questions in an entirely different fashion.

## III. Problems

I believe the above facts are enough to show that E-I S's must be analyzed quite differently from Y/N questions. Now, recall that Elliot observed that E-I S's and Y/N questions have different sentence intonations. However, he did not pay enough attention to this important fact. English speakers, including young language learners such as babies in the crib intuitively know that the so called sentence intonations in English are just as important semantic indicators as the applications of syntactic rules such as the Subject-Verb Inversion. However, generative grammarians have long ignored the important relationship between semantics and some aspects of phonology, especially sentence intonations.

Now, as a syntactician I am faced with lots of difficult problems, for which unfortunately I have no solutions to offer at the moment. Let me just cite the four problems which worry me most.

Problem 1: Just what is the semantic structure for E-I S's?

Problem 2: What is the semantic difference between E-I S's and Wh-Exclamatory S's? They share several properties in common but they seem to differ from each other in at least five significant ways:

(1) E-I S's cannot be embedded, while Wh-Exclamatory S's can as in (45)-(45)' and (46)-(46)'.

(45) Does she have beautiful legs!

(45)' \*Look does she have beautiful legs!

(46) What beautiful legs she has!

(46)' Look what beautiful legs she has!

(11) The intensifiers like very may not occur in E-I S's, while they are allowed in Wh-Exclamatory S's as in (47)-(48).

(47) \*Is syntax very easy!

(48) How very easy syntax is!

(111) Ever may occur in E-I S's, while it may not in Wh-Exclamatory S's.

(49) Is syntax ever easy!

(50) \*How easy syntax ever is!

\*How ever easy syntax is!

(iv) Not may occur in E-I S's, while it may not in Wh-Exclamatory S's.

(51) Am I ever not hungry!

(52) \*How hungry I am not!

(v) E-I S's may be used as a reply to a question, but Wh-Exclamatory S's may not.

(53) A: Are you hungry?

B: Boy, am I hungry!

(54) A: Are you hungry?

B: \*Boy, how hungry I am!

Problem 3: Is there any real syntactic motivation to postulate an abstract performative verb for exclamatory S's? Elliot suggests that all exclamatory S's are embedded in the structure such as (55).

(55) I EXCLAIM that ...

There are a number of objections to this hypothesis.

Above all, the English verb exclaim may not take embedded S's as its complement. (56)-(57) are unacceptable.

(56) \*Harry exclaimed how easy syntax is.

(57) \*Harry exclaimed that syntax is so easy.

Second, what about E-I S's? Their surface structures may not be



embedded in any verb. Besides, we have already observed that E-I S's are semantically far more complex than their surface structures, as suggested by the 14 characteristics.

Problem 4: Despite their meaning difference, the surface structures of questions and exclamatory S's in many languages show a striking similarity. Why is it the case?

Boy, is syntax ever difficult!

#### FOOTNOTES

1. I suspect ever in E-I S's are related to ever in the expressions such as (i)-(ii).

(i) Whatever difficulty I may have, I'll do it.

(ii) Be it ever so humble, there is no place like home.

#### REFERENCES

Elliot, Dale. 1971. The Grammar of Emotive and Exclamatory Sentences in English. Ohio State Ph. D Dissertation. Ohio State Working Papers in Linguistics, No. 8.

Sadock, Jerry. 1971. "Queclaratives". Papers from the Seventh Regional Meeting Chicago Linguistic Society.