Another Look at, say, Some Grammatical Constraints, on, oh, Interjections and Hesitations

Deborah James
University of Michigan

In James (1972) I showed that interjections and hesitations, long ignored by linguists, both have specific meanings of their own and are constrained by grammatical rules. In this paper I will describe another set of grammatical constraints on interjections and hesitations which have not been hitherto noticed.

In traditional grammar, the category "interjection" was a wastebasket category which contained words and phrases with several different types of functions. I am concerned here with one particular subgroup of the "interjection" class, namely, words such as oh, ah, say, well, and uh; and with the behavior of these words when they are inside sentences, rather than when they are sentence-initial or occurring by themselves. Most of these words could also be described as hesitations. I am interested here not only in them, but also in simple pauses, another type of hesitation.

Each of these words, and also a pause, can be shown to carry its own special meaning or set of meanings, and to occur only in certain semantic contexts. Examples of this are to be found in James (1972). In this paper, the meanings of specific words will not be discussed in detail, except in the case of say, where the specific meaning of the word is relevant to the constraints discussed.

When sentence-internal, these interjections and hesitations have one important semantic characteristic in common. That is that the use of any one of them indicates that the speaker has had to stop to think about what to say. He may be trying to remember some item; he may be choosing one alternative to mention out of several possible ones; he may be trying to think of the best way to describe something; he may be hesitating because he is reluctant to tell his hearer something. He would typically use a different word, or a pause, depending on which of these things he was doing. I am here concerned not with the question of the conditions under which one particular word would be used rather than another, however, but rather, I am concerned with the following question: given that the speaker has stopped to think about something in mid-sentence, which elements which appear in the sentence can he have stopped to think about? Can it be anything in the sentence? Or are there structural constraints on what it can be? The element which the speaker is stopping to think about I will call the "referent" of the interjection or hesitation, and I will say that the interjection or hesitation "refers to" that element. In this paper I hope to show the following things: that interjections and hesitations appear to be able to "refer" only to elements which are constituents; that this is useful to linguistic theory, in that it is possible to use interjections and hesitations as a test of constituent structure; and that there are in addition other types of constraints on what an interjection or hesitation can refer to; two main examples of these will be given, of which one involves only the interjection say, and the other involves at least most of the interjections and hesitations discussed here.

To illustrate the first of these points, let us look at (1).

(1) The girl who said she liked, oh, Vivaldi dried the dishes

Oh in this sort of usage normally means that the speaker is stopping to choose one out of several possibilities which he could mention. The question is, can he, while saying oh in (1), be deciding to say "Vivaldi dried the dishes" over, for example, "Beethoven moved back the furniture"? Obviously not; he can only be choosing Vivaldi to mention over other composers, e.g. Beethoven, etc., whom the girl said she liked. In the terminology I am using, we can say, then, that "Vivaldi" is the referent of the interjection, and that "Vivaldi dried the dishes" cannot be. We should note that the latter phrase is not a constituent in (1).

Another type of example is (2):

(2) That Kay is thinking of opening a boutique in--ah, San Francisco is considered likely by Bob

Ah, when sentence-internal, normally indicates that the speaker has forgotten and then managed to remember something; and that he is pleased about it, or thinks it is significant. In (2), the only possible interpretation is that the speaker has remembered that the particular city involved is San Francisco; he cannot have remembered that the right way to complete the sentence is "San Francisco is considered likely by Bob" rather than, say, "Seattle is regarded as reasonably certain by her mother". Thus, ah can only refer to "San Francisco" in (2).

Both (1) and (2) contain islands (using the terminology of Ross (1967))--(1) a complex noun phrase and (2) a sentential subject. The presence of an island is not the crucial factor in this matter, however; for example, (3) does not contain an island, but is constrained in a similar way to (1) and (2):

(3) Lucy was told the office wanted...a piñata by the chief clerk

(I intend this sentence to have the reading which is paraphraseable as "Lucy was told by the chief clerk that the office wanted a piñata", rather than the reading in which it is the chief clerk who made the piñata.) In (3), the speaker pauses, probably because he has forgotten something. The thing he has forgotten, however, can only be "a piñata"; it cannot be that it was "a piñata by the chief clerk", rather than, say, "a mobile by the office boy". Note that such a phrase would not be a constituent.

Compare also (4) and (5). These sentences contain the interjection well, which is discussed in R. Lakoff (1970). Lakoff points out that well normally indicates that not all the information the hearer might need is present in what the speaker says.

(4) The, well, doctor, was present at the meeting
(5) The doctor, well, was present at, the meeting

In (4), the speaker might, for example, be indicating that he is not certain that it is appropriate to describe this person as a doctor. In (5), he might be indicating, for example, that there is more he would like to say about the doctor's conduct than that he was present at the meeting. Note that it would be rather odd to say (6), with the suggested intonation:

(6) The, well, doctor was present at, the meeting

and that it would be most odd for the speaker to be indicating reservations both about whether the person was a doctor and whether "was present at" was an adequate description of what this person did, simultaneously. Of course, the phrase "doctor was present at" is not a constituent.

We can explain the facts in (1)-(6) concerning what these interjections can refer to--that is, what the speaker can be stopping to think about, choose, remember, etc., while saying the interjection--by hypothesizing that an interjection can only refer to an element which is a constituent.

If this hypothesis is correct, one might suppose that one could use interjections and hesitations as a test of constituent structure. I think this is the case. Take, for example, the following sentence:

(7) Bill might believe, say, Mary to have left yesterday

It is generally held that there is a rule of Raising which moves the noun phrase "Mary" in a sentence such as (7) from the lower to the higher sentence. This would mean, of course, that the phrase "Mary to have left yesterday" is not a constituent. The facts concerning interjections support this constituent structure and thus the existence of this rule. Say in this usage means "for example". Informants agree that in (7), the thing which is being put forward as an example can only be "Mary"; the speaker cannot be selecting "Mary to have left yesterday" as an example, over, say, "Sam to be arriving tomorrow". Correspondingly, take the following sentences:[2]

(8) Bill believes--ah, Nixon to be a good president!
(9) Bill believes, well, the earth to be flat

(8) is somewhat anomalous unless one interprets it as meaning that the speaker has remembered that it is Nixon who Bill believes to be a good president (rather than that what Bill believes is that Nixon is a good president). And in (9), the element which the speaker is indicating reservations about can only be "the earth" and not the whole proposition "the earth to be flat".

Another case in which interjections and hesitations indicate one sort of constituent structure as opposed to another has to do with auxiliary verbs. For example, take (10), (11), and (12).

(10) Jack, oh, may have been delayed
(11) Jack may, oh, have been delayed
(12) Jack may have, oh, been delayed

Each of these sentences can occur in a context in which the oh refers to the entire phrase which follows. Suppose that the speaker is trying to make excuses for why Jack is not present. In (10), while pausing and saying oh, the speaker may be deciding to say "may have been delayed" over, for example, "probably had some other pressing engagement". In (11), he may be deciding to say "have been delayed" over, for example, "be stuck in a traffic jam somewhere"; and in (12), he may be deciding to say "been delayed" over, say, "gotten lost". If it is in fact the case that interjections can only refer to constituents, we must conclude that each of these phrases is a constituent. The only analysis which would allow these to be constituents is, of course, the auxiliaries as main verbs analysis (Ross (1969)), in that version of it in which the subject "Bill" is formed by Chomsky-adjunction to the S-node above may, thus allowing "may have been delayed", as well as "have been delayed" and "been delayed" to form one constituent.

It appears, then, that the behavior of interjections and hesitations can be useful to linguistic theory as a test of constituent structure.

I would now like to examine in more detail the behavior of one particular interjection, say, and demonstrate some interesting constraints on it. This word can have several different meanings. When it occurs by itself or sentence-initially, as in sentences such as "Say, did you hear what happened to John?", it has one particular type of meaning, which I will not be concerned with in this paper. When it occurs inside sentences or sentence-finally, there are two other types of meaning which it can have. One of these I will call the "let's imagine" reading; it occurs in contexts in which the speaker is hypothesizing a situation. One might say, for example, "The moon is made, say, of green cheese". This would be equivalent to "Let's imagine the moon is made of green cheese". The other reading I will call the "for example" reading. One would be using this if one said the following:

(13) I've decided to go shopping tomorrow. I'm thinking of buying, say, a pair of shoes.

Say is paraphraseable by "for example" here. One might note that there are constraints on when say can have this reading, however; for example, imagine someone saying to a friend

(14) Yes, I went shopping yesterday. I bought, say, a pair of shoes.

One could not say this and mean "I bought, for example, a pair of shoes". Similarly, if one's friend Susan was moving to a new apartment, and one of the reasons for this was that she preferred the

location, one could not describe this by saying

(15) Susan is moving to a new apartment, say, because she prefers the location.

I do not know what the right generalization to explain these facts is, but an important point seems to be that for the use of say in the "for example" reading to be appropriate, there must be a notion of possibility, as opposed to certainty, present in the sentence. This is present in (13) (in (13) the speaker is saying he may buy a pair of shoes), but not in (14) and (15), which describe situations which are definite and factual. (15) and the second sentence of (14) could, of course, occur in different contexts with say having the "let's imagine" reading; they would then mean "Let's imagine it's because she prefers the location that Susan is moving to a new apartment", "Let's imagine it's a pair of shoes that I bought". For the rest of this paper, I will be concerned only with the "for example" reading of say.

Say differs from all the other interjections discussed here in that it can refer not only to something which follows it but also to something which precedes it. For example, take (16):

(16) Janet might wait for me for ten minutes, { *well / say / *oh / *uh / *--ah! }

Say in (16) would typically refer to "ten minutes", meaning "for example, ten minutes". The other interjections are unacceptable, since nothing follows them and they cannot refer to what precedes. Say can also refer to a strongly stressed element which is some distance away; e.g.:

(17) Janet might wait for me, say .

In this sentence, say means "for example, Janet". The stressed element can be quite a long way away, e.g.

(18) Janet might believe that Bill's found out that all the students are going to quit class and file a complaint against the professor, say

Say can mean "for example, Janet" here also.

However, there are some interesting restrictions on when say can refer to a non-adjacent stressed element. To begin with, take the following two sentences:

(19) That girl I told you about, who Phil, say, might like, is standing over there

(20) That girl I told you about, who Phil might like, say, is standing over there

In both of these sentences, say means "for example, Phil". However, compare (21):

(21) That girl I told you about, who Phil might like, is standing over there, say

Say cannot be interpreted as meaning "for example, Phil" here; in fact, it can only have the "let's imagine" reading. Similarly, take (22) and (23):

(22) To discover that it was Fred, say, that Sue had gotten engaged to would be quite a surprise
(23) To discover that it was Fred that Sue had gotten engaged to, say, would be quite a surprise

In both (22) and (23), say means "for example, Fred". But it cannot mean this in (24):

(24) To discover that it was Fred that Sue had gotten engaged to would be quite a surprise, say

Similarly, in (25) and (26) say means "for example, a bicycle", but in (27) it cannot:

(25) A bicycle, say, might be a good thing to give Jenny, and Teresa really wants a pair of roller skates
(26) A bicycle might be a good thing to give Jenny, say, and Teresa really wants a pair of roller skates
(27) A bicycle might be a good thing to give Jenny, and Teresa really wants a pair of roller skates, say

One might suppose from this data that say cannot refer to elements within islands, since the examples I have so far given involve elements in relative clauses, sentential subjects, and coordinate constructions, which are all islands. However, these restrictions seem to concern not only islands, but any sort of embedded sentence; for example, take (28)-(32):

(28) It would be quite a surprise to discover that Sue had gotten engaged to Fred, say, because she doesn't like Germans
(29) It would be quite a surprise to discover that Sue had gotten engaged to Fred, because she doesn't like Germans, say

In (29), say cannot mean "for example, Fred".

(30) I was told Jane, say, might leave by Mrs. Black
(31) I was told Jane might leave, say, by Mrs. Black
(32) I was told Jane might leave by Mrs. Black, say

In (32), say cannot mean "for example, Jane". As in (21), (24), (27), and (29), it can only have the "let's imagine" reading.

The appropriate generalization appears to be that in order for say to be able to refer to a stressed element some distance away, that stressed element must command all of the material between it and the interjection. That is, say cannot refer to an element in an embedded sentence when elements of a higher sentence intervene between them. This applies not only when the stressed element precedes, but also when it follows; for example:

(33) Dorothy thought that Fred might like, say, Betty
(34) Dorothy, say, thought that Fred might like Betty

In (34), say cannot mean "for example, Betty".[3]

One might ask whether say obeys this same constraint when it has its other meaning, that paraphraseable as "let's imagine". It does not, because the "let's imagine" reading of say does not seem to be able to refer to an element in the same sense as the "for example" reading does. Say in this reading seems rather to refer to the entire sentence, in that it renders the entire sentence hypothetical. For example, the sentence "Janet waited for me" might be paraphrased as "It was Janet who waited for me". The sentence "Janet waited for me, say" could simply be paraphrased as "Let's imagine it was Janet who waited for me"; in other words, say here simply renders the whole sentence hypothetical.

One might also ask whether other interjections behave like say; that is, first, whether they can refer to stressed phrases not immediately adjacent, and second, if so, whether they obey the constraint above. Some do seem to be able to refer to stressed phrases; with others, it is not clear whether they do or not. Since the situation is somewhat complicated, I will give only one example, ah. Ah does seem to be able to refer to non-adjacent stressed phrases; however, it does not seem to obey the same constraint that say does. (35) is an example:

(35) Dorothy--ah!--thought that Fred might like Betty!

(35) could certainly occur in a context in which it is the person Dorothy thought Fred might like, namely Betty, which the speaker has managed to remember. Thus the speaker's pause and ah can be described as referring to "Betty"; but note that "Betty" is in an embedded sentence, and ah is not. Ah then does not obey the same constraint as say. The same seems to apply to other hesitations having to do with remembering, such as pauses and uh; one can ascertain this by replacing ah in (35) by these.

Let us return now to the constraint on the "for example" reading of say. I stated that if the stressed phrase did not command all of the material between it and say, say could not refer to it. From this it does not follow, however, that if the stressed phrase does command all of the material between it and say, say can refer to it. For example:

(36) Frances might not lend her homework, say, to Ed
(37) Frances might not, say, lend her homework to Ed
(38) Frances might not lend her, say, homework to Ed

The noun "Frances" commands all of the material between itself and say in these sentences. In (36), say could, I think, quite plausibly mean "for example, Frances". In (37), however, it seems considerably more difficult to interpret say in this way (a more natural interpretation would be that it means "for example, lend her homework to Ed"). In (38), it is impossible to interpret say as meaning "for example, Frances"; it could only mean "for example, homework". I am not able to suggest any generalization which would explain the facts of (36) and (37) and sentences similar to them; with regard to (38), however, I would like to suggest that it seems to be true of both say and ah, and, I believe, of any interjection or hesitation, that if they are situated inside an embedded sentence or any other noun phrase, and are surrounded on both sides by other elements in that noun phrase, they cannot refer to anything outside of the noun phrase. This is exemplified not only by (36) but also by the following sentences:

(39) Bill might discover that, say, Sarah wouldn't dance with Bob

Here, say cannot mean "for example, Bill".

(40) The secretary who takes care of, {say, --ah!--} the program is going to go to Abilene

Say here cannot mean "for example, Abilene"; and in the case of ah, note that, if the speaker found it necessary to pause in the middle of the sentence to try to remember where the secretary was going to go to, it seems inappropriate for him to pause in the middle of the relative clause to do this. It would, however, be quite acceptable for him to pause after the end of the relative clause (i.e., "The secretary who takes care of the program--ah!--is going to Abilene!"). A simple pause or an uh would, I believe, be as inappropriate as ah here, if they were intended to refer to "Abilene".

Compare also (41)-(44). I think that in no case can the stressed phrase be the example referred to by say, and in no case can the stressed phrase appropriately be the thing the speaker has stopped to try to remember in pausing and saying ah:

(41) That Sam, {say, --ah!--} wears a blue hat will be surprising to the mayor
(42) Peter is going to, {say, --ah!--} buy kohlrabi and he's going to do it on Tuesday
(43) Jim might have been told Sam, {say, --ah!--} acquired a parakeet by Arlene
(44) Bill is thinking of giving one of, {say, --ah!--} his old books to Sarah

In summary, I have tried to illustrate several ways in which interjections and hesitations are constrained grammatically. First, they can be described as "referring to" certain grammatical elements in a sentence; and these elements seem to have to be constituents. For this reason, interjections and hesitations can be used as a test of constituent structure. Secondly, the interjection say differs from other interjections in that it can refer to elements which precede it, and, in one of its several readings, its "for example" reading, it is constrained in that the element it refers to must command all the material between itself and say. It is not clear that any other interjections and hesitations obey this constraint; ah at any rate does not. Thirdly, it is the case at least for say, ah, uh, and pauses, that, if they are inside a noun phrase, including embedded sentences, they cannot refer to anything outside of that noun phrase.[4]

These are only some of the constraints on what interjections and hesitations can refer to; the facts of sentences (36) and (37), for example, are unexplained.

I have tried in this paper, then, to give further evidence, in addition to that given in James (1972), that interjections and hesitations are a part of competence and obey grammatical rules; and to show that there is a whole field of data here which has never before been noticed, and which provides an interesting area for investigation.

Footnotes

1. Oh has two rather distinctly different meanings, which are associated with distinctly different intonation patterns. These are described briefly in James (1972). In discussing (1), I am treating oh as what is called "oh_2" in the earlier paper--that is, as being pronounced with a drawn-out, steady tone, at about the same level as the preceding "liked"; "Vivaldi" then is said on a lower tone. Oh would then have the meaning described. If, however, one were to pause slightly, and then pronounce the oh on a short, high tone, and "Vivaldi" also on a high tone, this would be what is called "oh_1" in the earlier paper, and it would have a meaning similar to that of ah, described below in the text. Whether oh in (1) is treated as oh_1 or oh_2, the point being made about the sentence holds. Oh used in later examples will also be considered to be oh_2.

2. These sentences were pointed out to me by John Lawler and Charles Pyle.

3. An example should be given here to illustrate that say can under other circumstances refer to following elements. In the sentence "Julie, say, might will her estate to Dave", say could be interpreted as meaning "for example, Dave".

4. In the case of say, it would of course be possible, at least in part, to combine these two constraints; one might say, for example, that say and its referents must (at least) command each other. Since other interjections obey only the one constraint and not the other,

however, perhaps the two should be kept as separate constraints in the case of say also.

Bibliography

James, Deborah, 1972. "Some Aspects of the Syntax and Semantics of Interjections", Papers from the Eighth Regional Meeting, Chicago Linguistics Society.

Lakoff, Robin, 1970. "Questionable Answers and Answerable Questions", to appear in Papers in Linguistics in Honor of Henry and Renee Kahane, University of Illinois Press.

----------, 1972. "Language in Context", Language 48:907-927.

Lawler, John, 1972. "Generic to a Fault", Papers from the Eighth Regional Meeting, Chicago Linguistics Society.

Morgan, J.L., 1972. "Syntactic Form and Conversational Import--Some Interactions", Limiting the Domain of Linguistics, University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee Press.

Ross, J.R., 1967. Constraints on Variables in Syntax, M.I.T. dissertation.

---------, 1969. "Auxiliaries as Main Verbs", Studies in Philosophical Linguistics, Series One, W. Todd, ed.