Surprise in questions
Agnès Celle
Paris Diderot University

Tracking emotions in language poses several challenges to a linguist. Firstly, speakers do not necessarily verbalize their emotions. Secondly, emotion lexemes describe emotions but do not necessarily express them (Kövecses 2000, 2017). Thirdly speakers may express emotions as part of a conversation routine without actually experiencing them (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 2006). Surprise is a case in point. In some languages, surprise is expressed by a mirative morpheme (DeLancey 1997, 2001). In English, surprise adjectives and nouns are not commonly used to express genuine surprise (Celle et al. 2017). Surprise is expressed by interjections, swear words, emotive modifiers, exclamations (Michaelis 2001), questions (Kay & Fillmore 1999, Michaelis & Feng 2015) and certain constructions (Celle & Lansari 2015). This talk reports on a study based on the annotation of surprise episodes in three filmscripts drawn from the OpenSubtitle Corpus. Interrogative structures were found to be the most frequent expression of surprise. The high frequency of interrogative structures (as opposed to declarative and exclamative structures) can be related to the epistemic and cognitive status of surprise (Meyer et al. 1997, Reisenzein 2000), which sets it apart from other emotions. Constituent interrogatives in surprise contexts were found to be three times more frequent than polar interrogatives, which confirms that polar interrogatives are less apt to express surprise (Siemund 2017), although they are known to outnumber constituent interrogatives in standard communication contexts (Stivers 2010).

Interrogatives used in reaction to an unexpected event may be either direct speech acts or indirect speech acts. In addition to expressing surprise, the former seek information, as opposed to the latter. I argue that questioning plays an important role in the cognitive integration of surprising information. This cognitive integration can be achieved along a cline that goes from clarification requests to ordinary questions and inferential questions. These surprise questions are mainly induced by linguistic information. They correspond to “stance follows” (Du Bois 2007) taken in reaction to a discourse content from the addressee.

Interrogatives used as indirect speech acts do not have the illocutionary force of questions as they are not information-seeking, nor do they aim to increase the speaker’s knowledge. Their epistemic status is therefore different. I focus on two types of questions: rhetorical questions, i.e. questions that contain their own resolution (Ginzburg 2012), and “unresolvable” questions (what the hell is this?), i.e. questions that implicate that no resolution can be found. I show that emotion-induced rhetorical questions serve an argumentative function whereby the addressee is asked to commit to a proposition that the speaker does not commit to in a direct way. They offer a pragmatic means to reduce the belief discrepancy associated with the experience of surprise. Unresolvable questions tend to be generated by evidence judged incongruous. They are speaker-oriented, often self-addressed, the speaker attempting to emotionally adapt to an incongruous situation without expecting an answer from an addressee. I show that interjections and emotive modifiers encode speaker perspective in the same way as evidentials in other languages (San Roque et al. 2017).

References


Celle, A. & L. Lansari (2015) On the mirative meaning of aller + infinitive compared with its equivalents in English. *Taming the TAME systems, Cahiers Chronos* n°27, 289-305


Corpus:

Opensubtitles

http://opus.nlpl.eu/OpenSubtitles.php
Tools:

Glozz