Displaying sympathy with compassionate interjections: a comparative study of Australian Aboriginal language conversations

Speakers of many Australian Aboriginal languages use compassionate interjections to convey sympathy for persons undergoing difficult or unfortunate circumstances, as well as for displaying emotional attachment to persons, places, animals, etc. Taking an interactional linguistics approach, we compare the use of these interjections in multiparty conversations conducted in four Australian languages, from four distinct language families: Murrinhpatha, Gija, Jaru and Garrwa. Murrinhpatha has a clear 'primary' interjection (the forms are not found in other word classes, eg. *Huh?*, *No*, *Ouch!*) while the other languages have 'secondary' interjections (the forms also exist in other word classes – *Awesome!*, *Shit!* – sometimes as lexicalised phrases or clauses *No-way*, *Goodbye, FFS!*) (Ameka 1992; Bloomfield 1933). Across the various collections, the triggers that prompt the use of these sympathetic responses range from restricted ('persons only', in the case of Murrinhpatha) through to broad ('persons, places, animals and plants', in the case of Jaru). There are also distributional differences across the collections as to where within conversational turns, and between conversational turns, these interjection tokens may occur. These distributional factors, as well as certain phonological and morphosyntactic factors provide clues as to the etymologies of these specific interjections. Our comparative approach also provides a broader vista on how and where different languages source the forms that ultimately enter their respective word class 'interjection'.

References:

Ameka, Felix K. 1992. "Interjections: the universal yet neglected part of speech." *Journal of Pragmatics* 18 (2–3): 101–18. Bloomfield, Leonard. 1933. *Language*. New York: Holt.