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## PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF PRIMARY INTERJECTIONS IN SHAKESPEARE'S COMEDIES

This paper constitutes the first part of a research project aimed at examining the use of primary interjections in Shakespeare's plays from the perspective of their pragmatic functions. The project is structured in three successive phases, beginning with the comedies and followed by analyses of the tragedies and historical plays. Each phase will explore how interjections function pragmatically within their respective dramatic contexts, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of Shakespeare's use of these expressive linguistic elements across different genres. The paper surveys the pragmatic functions of primary interjections occurring in Shakespeare's comedies, placed against the context of general discussion on the pragmatic functions of interjections and their use in theatre plays.

Keywords: pragmatic functions, primary interjections, Shakespeare, comedies

### 1. Introduction

Interjections have received more attention recently and are being fronted and championed in linguistic studies. However, there is not much research on how they are used in historical theatre drama. Interjections play a significant role in communicating feelings, emotions, and identity, and the choices of interjections are often closely linked to specific theatre genres. In 16th-century drama, as well as in modern theatre drama, interjections are extensively used to convey emotion, enhance realism, and engage audiences. Depending on the theatrical genres, interjections are vital tools playwrights and actors use to evoke, for example, pathos in tragedies, punctuate action in historical dramas, or cause laughter in comedies. This paper constitutes the first part of a research project aimed at examining the use of primary interjections in Shakespeare's comedies from the

perspective of their pragmatic functions. Subsequently, a similar analysis will be conducted on the use of primary interjections in Shakespeare's tragedies and historical plays. The paper is an attempt to answer the following questions: 1) what primary interjections are used in Shakespeare's comedies, and 2) what pragmatic functions do they convey? This study focuses exclusively on primary interjections in Shakespeare's plays in order to ensure analytical clarity and linguistic precision. Primary interjections are direct, non-derivative expressions of affective or cognitive states, and they function largely independently of syntactic integration. By isolating this class of interjections, the study aims to offer a more focused and systematic account of how such elements contribute to the pragmatic shaping of a dialogue. Secondary interjections, while also relevant, will be considered in future stages of the project to maintain methodological consistency. The paper, thus, addresses the definition and categorisation of primary interjections by adopting a pragmatic point of view, the nature and role of interjections used by Shakespeare in his plays, and the analysis of interjections and their pragmatic functions in his comedies.

## 2. Source material and data collection

The data in the present study comprises primary interjections collected manually from *William Shakespeare, The Complete Works*, second edition 2005, and comprises 13 comedies: *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, or *What You Will*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*.

## 3. Interjections: definitions, classification, pragmatic functions

Historically, interjections have often been described as marginal to language and regarded as non-linguistic phenomena (see Muller 1862, Gesch 1869 quoted in Jespersen 1922:415, or Sapir 1970, among others). Also, in contemporary literature, linguists such as Quirk et al. (1985), Trask (1993), and Crystal (1995) define interjections as words that only express emotions and do not enter into any syntactic structures. However, during the last several decades, a growing interest in interjections has been observed; thanks to this, they have been moved from the periphery to the centre of linguistic studies and other related disciplines. In contemporary linguistics, there are generally two opposing views on interjections. One is represented by researchers such as Quirk, Greenbaum, Crystal and Trask (among others), for whom interjections do not belong to language and the

second by researchers such as Wierzbicka, Ameka, Wilkins, who see interjections as linguistic elements conveying particular meanings, that is, showing semantic structures. Thus, in the specialist literature, many definitions may be found proposing competing views on interjections and considering their formal or functional properties. Together with the *pragmatic turn* in linguistics that started in the early 1970s (Jucker 2012), many language researchers adopted a broad pragmatic perspective, which also influenced the research on interjections, positioning them as important language elements functioning in social life and by means of which local values, norms and rules of communicative interaction may be revealed (Ameka, Wilkins 2006). Thus, it may be claimed that interjections convey speakers' attitudes and communicative intentions and are context-dependent. As we adopt the pragmatic point of view on the nature and role of interjections in the language in our study, we will not delve into the discussion concerning opposing views and definitions of interjections (for such a discussion, see, e.g. Wharton 2003). For the present analysis, Ameka's definition of interjections is adopted (1992: 106): "Interjections are relatively conventionalized vocal gestures (or more generally, linguistic gestures) which express a speaker's mental state, action or attitude or reaction to a situation." Following Ameka's argument, interjections are signs closely connected with context, i.e. indexical (Ameka and Wilkins 2006), for example, the English *Ouch!* uttered by somebody indexes the person as feeling a sharp pain. To fully interpret the utterance, the speaker needs to be identified, and a complex process of conversational inference must be carried out. To fully understand the phenomenon of interjections, Ameka (1992) and Ameka and Wilkins (2006) categorise them into *primary* and *secondary* interjections. Primary interjections are defined as "little words or nonwords which in terms of their distribution can constitute an utterance by themselves and do not normally enter into construction with other word classes, for example, *Ouch!*, *Wow!*, *Gee!*, *Oho!* *Oops!* etc. [...] They do not represent non-speech sounds. They form a unique form-meaning unit." (Ameka 1992: 105). These little words may be sounds or sound sequences not found in other parts of the language. Additionally, they are not homophonous or homonymous with other words (Wierzbicka 1991, Ameka 1992, Ameka and Wilkins 2006). On the other hand, secondary interjections are words that have independent semantic value. Still, they can express emotions, mental attitudes, or states as utterances by themselves, such as *Help!* *Fire!* *Christ!* - can be used in either referential domain or non-referential, i.e. in interjectional form. Apart from primary and secondary interjections, Ameka (1992:111) introduces a third category of interjections: *interjectional phrases*. These are multi-word expressions which constitute utterances by themselves expressing or referring to mental states or acts, for example, *Thank God!* Ameka's definition of primary interjections corresponds to the definition of interjections proposed by Wierzbicka (2003:291): "An interjection can be

defined as a linguistic sign (1) which can be used on its own, (2) which expresses a specifiable meaning, (3) which does not include other signs (with a specifiable meaning), (4) which is not homophonous with another lexical item that would be perceived as semantically related to it, and (5) which refers to the speaker's current mental state or mental act (for example I feel..., I want..., I think..., I know...).” Thus, the category of interjections includes independent, meaningful items that refer to speakers' mental states or actions. However controversial the lexical meaning of interjections may be in the specialist literature, we assume that they have pragmatic meaning and that the interpretation of their meaning is strongly contextual. Depending on the meaning interjections predicate, they may be categorised in terms of the communicative functions they fulfil defined by Bühler (1934) and modified by Jakobson (1965) (except for the poetic function), which are the following:

- referential: corresponds to onomatopoeic words,
- expressive: used to convey feelings and includes most prototypical interjections (*oh*, *wow*, *damn*, etc.),
- conative: accounts for interjections directed at an addressee (*psst!*, *sh!*, etc.),
- phatic: defines interjections used to establish and maintain communicative contact (*aha*, *yeah*, etc.),
- metalinguistic: corresponds to interjections used as discourse markers (*right*, *eh*, etc.) (Cuenca 2000).

Following is the classification of interjections, based on their pragmatic functions, proposed by Ameka (1992) and Ameka and Wilkins (2006):

- *expressive interjections*, expressing the speaker's mental state, are further subdivided into *emotive interjections*, signalling emotions and sensations (*Yuk!*, *Ouch!*), and *cognitive interjections* pertaining to the state of knowledge and thoughts at the moment of speaking (*O!*, *Aha!*),
- *conative interjections* are directed at an addressee, either to get attention or demand a response or an action from someone (*Shh!* *Psst!*),
- *phatic interjections* establish and maintain communicative contact and express the speaker's mental attitude toward the ongoing conversation (*Uh-huh*).

Ameka's classification is based on what is assumed to be the most dominant function of the interjection in question concerning its semantics, but it seems worth stressing that a particular interjection may serve multiple functions depending on the context. Although there are many other classifications based on pragmatic dimensions (Ameka and Wilkins 2006), we will not present them, as in the analytical part of the paper, we will rely on Ameka's classification presented above.

#### 4. Interjections and pragmatic noise in theatre drama

As it has already been noted in my previous paper (Drzazga 2019), interjections play a significant role in communication, particularly in spoken language. These non-lexical expressions - such as *Oh*, *Ah*, *Eh*, or *Hmm* – serve as spontaneous outbursts that convey emotions, reactions, or shifts in interpersonal dynamics. In written forms, interjections typically appear in contexts that replicate speech, such as direct quotations, monologues, or when directly addressing the reader. As Schulze and Tabakowska (2004) observe, interjections function as indicators of space and time in writing. When employed as spatial markers, interjections reflect the psychological and sociolinguistic aspects of a character, revealing their emotional state or suggesting their social background. For instance, a character who frequently uses abrupt exclamations (e.g. *Ouch!*, *Yay!*) might be interpreted as hot-headed, while one who uses playful or exaggerated interjections (e.g. *Holy moly!*, *Yippee!*) may be seen as humorous. Moreover, interjections can provide cultural context – certain interjections may indicate a character's national or ethnic identity, reflecting linguistic habits, idiomatic expressions, or even stereotypes (e.g. *Blether!* meaning in Scottish English 'nonsense' or 'idle talk'), thereby enriching their portrayal. In addition to their role in signalling space and time, interjections also perform an expressive function. They convey the speaker's emotional stance toward the situation described, providing the listener or reader with insight into the speaker's feelings (Wierzbicka 1969; O'Connell et al. 2007). They help shape the tone of discourse and add emotional nuance to the conversation, enhancing the interpretation of surrounding words. As O'Connell et al. (2007:435) note, interjections are particularly effective in adding subtlety that content words alone cannot convey. However, interjections are not static; they evolve over time. Older interjections, such as *Lo!* from Middle English, may become obsolete but can still be used by contemporary authors to evoke historical settings or signal a character's personality traits (Schulze and Tabakowska 2004:558).

In the context of theatrical dialogue, interjections play a pivotal role in shaping both emotional authenticity and psychological realism. Contemporary playwrights frequently employ interjections as a means of constructing distinctive character voices, thereby enhancing the verisimilitude of dramatic speech. The functional scope of interjections in dramatic texts is multifaceted. Specifically, they:

- Help make characters feel more lifelike by showing their spontaneous emotional reactions;
- Reflect the way people naturally speak, making the dialogue more believable and relatable;
- Heighten the impact of dramatic moments, especially during conflict or emotional high points;

- Distinguish between different characters' voices, which helps keep the audience engaged and the story clear;
- Shape the rhythm and flow of dialogue, affecting the pacing and energy of scenes;
- Add musicality to the language, enhancing the tone and overall feel of the performance;
- Draw the audience's attention to emotional changes or tensions between characters.

This complex interplay of functions underscores the interjection's utility as a rhetorical and dramaturgical device, integral to the construction of realistic and compelling theatrical dialogue.

Closely related to interjections is the concept of *pragmatic noise*, a term that refers to non-lexical vocalisations, such as *Oh*, *Ah*, *Eh*, *Hmm*, and filled pauses, as well as repetitions and hesitations. Culpeper and Kytö (2010) explored the prevalence of pragmatic noise in Early Modern English dramatic texts, showing that it occurs at a significantly higher density in play-texts than in other genres, such e.g. as prose fiction. This heightened frequency reflects the performative nature of theatre, where dialogue must simulate real-time spoken interaction. Pragmatic noise plays a crucial role in creating emotional realism, marking moments of hesitation, emotional response, turn-taking, or cognitive processing. These elements contribute to the affective depth of characters, making their interactions more engaging and emotionally resonant. Culpeper and Oliver (2020) argue that pragmatic noise is a deliberate and functional element in the characterisation process. It is not simply filler or incidental sound; it plays a central role in establishing and maintaining a character's emotional authenticity. In their study of Shakespeare's plays, they identify pragmatic noise as a key tool for enhancing characterisation and performance. For example, in *Hamlet*, the protagonist's frequent use of *O* and *Ha* during his soliloquies not only marks his emotional state but also underscores the psychological fragmentation that is central to his character. These vocalisations allow Hamlet to externalise his internal turmoil, creating a sense of tension between his thoughts and actions. Culpeper (2009) also explores the function of pragmatic noise in *Romeo and Juliet*, arguing that such vocalisations are vital for conveying the emotional turmoil of characters. In this play, pragmatic noise enhances the portrayal of characters' internal struggles, particularly during pivotal moments of decision-making. Juliet's use of interjections like *O*, *Ah*, and *Alas* helps externalise her inner conflict between love and familial duty, adding layers of meaning that are crucial for understanding her psychological state. These interjections signal her vulnerability, uncertainty, and emotional fragmentation. Rolsnes (2020) also highlights the role of interjections in *Hamlet*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Othello* as tools for characterisation. She notes that in *Twelfth Night*, Viola's

use of exclamations like *O!* and *Ah!* reflects her internal struggle, mirroring her emotional conflict between love and duty. In *Othello*, interjections such as *Ha!* signal the General's growing anxiety and jealousy. Rolsnes suggests that these interjections allow characters to externalise their emotions and provide the audience with crucial insights into their psychological states.

Overall, interjections and pragmatic noise, although seemingly peripheral in terms of grammatical structure, are essential for shaping the emotional and psychological complexity of characters in Shakespeare's plays. These elements function as powerful markers of affective states, interpersonal dynamics, and shifts in character identity. In Shakespearean drama, where characterisation and performance were intertwined, these tools highlight the inherently pragmatic and performative nature of a dialogue. They provide a subtle yet effective means of capturing the spontaneity of real-life speech, enriching the emotional resonance of the text and enhancing the audience's engagement with the characters' psychological and emotional journeys.

## 5. Interjections in Shakespeare's plays

William Shakespeare is the most renowned playwright of the Elizabethan period, and his works profoundly influenced the development of drama. His plays, which include masterpieces like *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*, continue to be studied and performed today. Shakespeare's writing exemplifies the poetic language, complex characters, and thematic depth of Elizabethan drama. Shakespeare's interjections are far from being incidental; on the contrary, they are potent tools that enhance his plays' emotional resonance, dramatic structure, and linguistic richness.

Shakespeare ensures that even small words carry weight by using interjections with the precision typical of himself, revealing layers of meaning in his characters and plots. In Shakespeare's comedies, interjections play a crucial role in creating humour, showcasing character quirks, and enhancing the light-hearted tone of the plays. What follows are a couple of examples of Shakespeare's use of primary interjections in his comedies grouped according to the pragmatic functions they fulfil in dialogues:

### a) expressive function of interjections

*O, she misused me past the endurance of a block! (Much Ado About Nothing)*

Here, *O* expresses frustration and exasperation as Benedick complains about Beatrice's sharp wit and mocking remarks; the interjection is the expression of his irritation and affection at the same time.

*Ha! Was it you that cried that heave sentence? (Measure for Measure)*

*Ha* is a laugh-like interjection conveying joy, triumph, or mockery.

Then **hey-ho**, the wind and the rain! (*Twelfth Night*)

*Hey-ho* appears in a song, signalling cheerful feelings.

**Ha!** Let me see her: out, alas! she's cold. (*As You Like It*)

By *Ha* here, Oliver expresses surprise and concern upon discovering Celia in what he believes to be distress.

**O**, I have drunk poison while he utter'd it! (*Much Ado About Nothing*)

*O* indicates a sudden realization or understanding. Here, Claudio reacts with recognition and guilt upon learning the truth about Hero's death.

**Ha!** What sayest thou, that my self is true? (*Twelfth Night*)

*Ha* signals an intellectual response, suggesting surprise at a revelatory statement; it also marks the processing of unexpected information.

**Ho, ho!** You see these lovers seek a place to fight. (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*)

Using *Ho, ho* Puck identifies the lovers' intentions and comments on their behaviour with clever insight, thus signalling recognition or realization.

Shakespeare uses expressive interjections to punctuate dialogue with emotional depth making his characters' interactions lively and natural. They also humorously express the characters' emotions, often engaging the audience in the atmosphere of a given scene. Interjections also capture cognitive processes such as reasoning, comprehension, and reflection. They typically enrich dialogues by making characters' thoughts more relatable to the audience. They also signal the character's thoughts, realizations, or intellectual responses to a situation. Thus, they help the audience understand the character's mental states, such as moments of awareness, reasoning, logical reasoning, or decision-making.

b) conative function of interjections

**Ah**, Helen, goddess, nymph, perfect, divine! (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*)

Here, *Ah* is used to gain attention.

**O**, let us have it! (*Twelfth Night*)

The use of *O* here is aimed at encouraging action.

**Ho!** Officer, to prison with her! (*The Comedy of Errors*)

*Ho*, in this context, is used to command action. The speaker addresses an officer, using the interjection to emphasize urgency and authority.



**Oh**, what fools these mortals be! (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*)

*Oh* draws attention to the statement following it; its aim is to provoke reflection and/or agreement.

**Holla! Hoa**, Curtis! (*The Taming of the Shrew*)

In this context, *Holla* and *Hoa* are used to gain urgent attention.

Interjections with a conative function are used to influence or direct the actions or attention of others. They aim to engage, command, or persuade other characters, thus contributing to the dynamics of humour, conflict, or social interaction, depending on the context of the scene.

c. phatic function of interjections

**O**, I see how it is! (*Much Ado About Nothing*)

*O* functions here as an acknowledgement of what has been said, signalling to the other characters (and the audience) that the speaker understands or is attuned to the conversation; simultaneously, it maintains the social flow and keeps the interaction moving forward.

**Ah**, but I will talk to him. (*As You Like It*)

*Ah* functions as a signal that Rosalind is engaged in the conversation.

**What ho!** You clown, speak! (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*)

*Ho* preceded by *what* opens communication with a playful tone.

Shakespeare uses phatic interjections to enhance social interaction and the natural flow of dialogues. Here, phatic interjections help sustain, e.g. conversational engagement, express politeness, and maintain a light-hearted tone. They very often reflect the characters' relationships and humour.

On the basis of the examples provided above, it seems worth noticing that one interjection can have different senses and functions. The best example of which may be the interjection *O*, which appears in all three pragmatic functions, conveying at the same time a very wide range of senses. Even appearing within one and the same function, *O* can have different senses, e.g. it expresses frustration and exasperation, indicates a sudden realization or understanding in an expressive function only. It should be noted that *O* is not an isolated case; other interjections, such as *Ha* or *Oh* also display similar characteristics to *O* in the sense of their meaning capacity.

## 6. Pragmatic Functions of Primary Interjections in Shakespeare's Comedies

In the analysed corpus, 44 primary interjections were selected, including those consisting of two or more primary ones, e.g. *Ha, Ha*, or *Ah, Ha, Hi*, etc. Together, there are 818 occurrences of primary interjections in the corpus. The table below shows the interjections, the number of their occurrences, and the number of their occurrences as far as a particular pragmatic function is concerned.

Table 1: Interjections in Shakespeare's comedies

Interjection	Emotive function	Cognitive Function	Conative Function	Phatic Function	Number of occurrences	
					In numbers	In percent <sup>1</sup>
A		1	1		2	0,24
Ah		9	8	2	19	2,32
Ah, ha, hi	1				1	0,12
Aha	1		2		3	0,36
Alack	6	1			7	0,85
Alas	23	17	2	1	43	5,25
Fie	15				15	1,83
Fie, fie	9			1	10	1,22
Foh	2				2	0,24
Ha	5	8	7	3	23	2,81
Ha, ha	4	1	1	1	7	0,85
Ha, ha, ha	3				3	0,36
He, he	1				1	0,12
Heigh-ho	2		2		4	0,48
Hey			6		6	0,73
Hey-ho	4		3		7	0,85
Hilloa, loa			1		1	0,12
Ho	1	1	17		19	2,32
Ho, ho, ho			1		1	0,12
Ho-ho			1		1	0,12

<sup>1</sup> Percentage calculations are given to the second decimal place.

Table 1. cont.

Interjection	Emotive function	Cognitive Function	Conative Function	Phatic Function	Number of occurrences	
					In numbers	In percent <sup>1</sup>
Hoa-hoola			1		1	0,12
Hola			1		1	0,12
Holla			4		4	0,48
Hum				2	2	0,24
La	5	1	1		7	0,85
Lo	2		7		9	1,10
Lo lo			1		1	0,12
Lo now, lo			1		1	0,12
O	62	198	307	27	594	72,61
O,o			1		1	0,12
O, o, o	1				1	0,12
Och		1			1	0,12
O fie	2				2	0,24
O-ho			1		1	0,12
Oho		1	1		2	0,24
Oho, oho			1		1	0,12
O ho		1			1	0,12
So-ho, so-ho			1		1	0,12
Tilly-vally		1			1	0,12
What ho			7		7	0,85
What hoa			1		1	0,12
Whoa, ho, ho			1		1	0,12
Whoa-ho-hoa			1		1	0,12
Whoa-ha-ho			1		1	0,12
Total	149	241	391	37	818	100

Based on the collected material, it may be observed that among 44 interjections selected from the corpus, only seven are used 10 and more often than 10 times: *o*, *alas*, *ha*, *ah*, *ho*, *fie*, and *fie, fie*. The remaining 37 interjections are rarely used; there are not more than seven occurrences of each in all the comedies.

What is striking at first glance is the number of occurrences of the interjection *O* – 594 out of the total 818, which is 73% of all the interjections selected from the corpus. The interjection *O* appears in many contexts, conveying various emotions and also fulfilling all three pragmatic functions under discussion here. It seems justified to claim that the interjection *O* seems to be an all-purpose one, not only conveying emotion, drawing attention, and enhancing the rhythm and drama of dialogue but also expressing humour, irony, exasperation, romantic longing, and many other emotions. Let us observe several examples of its use in the corpus material conveying different meanings and functions:

*O she misused me past the endurance of a block! (Much Ado About Nothing)* Benedick, in a humorous way, describes Beatrice's witty insults, comparing himself to an unfeeling block. The *O* amplifies the humour and makes his love for Beatrice all the more entertaining, thus conveying the expressive function.

*O, she that hath a heart of that fine frame / To pay this debt of love but to a brother! (Twelfth Night)* The *O* underscores Orsino's melodramatic, intense longing for Olivia, whose mourning for her brother prevents her from returning his affections. This use of *O* fulfils an expressive function.

*O my daughter! O my ducats! (The Merchant of Venice)* *O* marks Shylock's reflective, cognitive response to his loss, indicating that he is becoming aware of the enormity of the betrayal he has encountered.

Shakespeare often uses *O* to heighten the dramatic effect of a scene, urging the audience to connect emotionally with the characters and events on stage and to intensify the emotional atmosphere, drawing attention to a key moment or some shift in the plot. Characters sometimes use *O* to call upon a higher power, appealing to fate, gods, or destiny for intervention or judgment, e.g.:

*O my lord, /When you went onward on this ended action, /I looked upon her with a soldier's eye. (Much Ado About Nothing)* Claudio uses *O* while he is undergoing the emotional transition from being a soldier focused on war to a man in love with Hero. The interjection conveys the conative function.

*O noble sir, / Your over-kindness doth wring tears from me! (Much Ado About Nothing)* Hero's *O* directly addresses the interlocutor, fulfilling a conative function.

*O time, thou must untangle this, not I; / It is too hard a knot for me t'untie! (Twelfth)* Here, Viola appeals to *time* to help her untangle her inner disorder as she realises the complexity of her situation connected with the disguise and unrequited love.

*O, ho! Do you come near me now? (Twelfth Night)* Malvolio's *O* is used to address his interlocutor as he seeks revenge.

**O, my love! My love is thine!** (*The Taming of the Shrew*) The speaker directly addresses Olivia with an emotional plea, showcasing the conative function by attempting to evoke a response from her.

In situations where characters are deeply involved in emotional exchanges, *O* can serve as a means to maintain the flow of conversation. It sometimes signals the speaker's ongoing emotional engagement, keeping the lines of communication open and connecting characters through shared emotions, as in the following examples:

**O, that I served that lady!** (*Twelfth Night*) *O* is a marker of involvement in the conversation and plot development. It keeps the flow of dialogue active and meaningful, thus acting as a phatic device.

**O, how bitter a thing it is to look into happiness through another man's eyes!** (*As You Like It*) Here, *O* keeps the conversation alive and maintains the emotional rhythm of the exchange.

To sum up, the interjection *O* appears in all three pragmatic functions: most often, in 307 instances, in a conative function where *O* is used to express an appeal to others or command attention, in 260 instances, fulfilling an expressive function referring to emotions or marking a moment of sudden realization or insight, in 27 instances *O* conveys a phatic function. On the other hand, the interjections *O*, *O* and *O*, *O*, *O* appear each only once in the corpus, fulfilling conative and cognitive functions, respectively.

Another often-used interjection in Shakespeare's comedies is *Alas*, which typically expresses sadness and disappointment. In the corpus, it takes the expressive function: in 23 instances, it expresses emotions and in 17 cognitive processes. *Alas* in Shakespeare's comedies often represents sorrow, pity, regret, or concern. It typically reflects a character's emotional state, thus conveying the expressive function.

**Alas, my love was fair, she's fled!** (*The Merchant of Venice*) Here, the interjection expresses regret.

**Alas, I'm not as you think!** (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*) Hermia feels concern or helplessness in a situation she cannot control.

**Alas, poor shepherd!** (*As You Like It*) Here, Celia expresses sorrow when she observes Silvius's romantic woes.

The interjection *Ho* ranks third in the frequency of use in the corpus – 19 instances out of the total 818, constituting only 2,3%. The interjection *Ho* in Shakespeare's comedies often serves as a directive or attention-getting device, aligning with the conative function of language. As per Jakobson's model, the conative function focuses on influencing or addressing the interlocutor, urging

them to act, respond, or pay attention. In Shakespeare's comedies, *Ho* is used to summon, command, or encourage a response from another character, making it a highly dynamic tool in dialogues. Let us observe some examples of its use:

***Ho, Ariel!*** (*The Tempest*) Prospero summons his servant, directing attention to the next stage of his plan.

***Follow, follow, follow, ho!*** (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*) Here, *Ho* is used as a cry to encourage characters into action, adding energy and urgency to the pursuit of Falstaff.

The interjection *Ho* is also repeated in the phrase as in the following examples:

***Ho, ho, ho!*** Coward, *why comest thou not?* (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*) Here, Puck, by using *Ho*, is addressing and taunting Lysander and Demetrius. It encourages the ongoing confusion and conflict.

***Ho, ho!*** *I have caught my heavenly jewel!* (*The Winter's Tale*) Here, Autolycus uses *Ho* to engage the audience in his schemes.

Both *Ho, ho* and *Ho, ho, ho* are used only once in all the comedies. *Ho* appears preceded by *What* in seven instances, also carrying conative function as in the following:

***What ho! What ho! What ho!"*** (*Love's Labour's Lost*) Here, the repetition of *Ho* adds urgency and commands attention in a lively way.

***What ho!*** *I am afraid of you.* (*The Taming of the Shrew*) Here, Petruchio uses *Ho* to command Katharina's attention in a comedic way.

The interjection *Ho*, contrary to the interjection *O*, is not versatile as it appears in conative function in the majority of cases; only in one case it appears in expressive function;

***Ho!*** *Who hath got the right Anne?* (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*) Here, *Ho* expresses excitement and triumph when the schemes involving Anne Page are revealed.

The interjection *Ah* occurs in the same amount as *Ho*, i.e. 19 instances (2,3%). Still, it seems more versatile in its use as it appears in all three functions: nine instances in the expressive function, eight in the conative function, and two in the phatic function. The interjection *Ah* in Shakespeare's comedies often serves an expressive function, revealing characters' emotions, attitudes, or inner thoughts. This use aligns with Jakobson's model of the expressive function of language, which focuses on conveying the speaker's feelings. In Shakespeare's comedies, this interjection is used to communicate emotions like surprise, delight, sorrow, affection, etc.

*Ah, what an angel wakes me from my flowery bed? (A Midsummer Night's Dream)* Here, Titania expresses wonder and awe upon seeing Bottom with a donkey's head.

*Ah, but you should pity me! (Twelfth Night)* Here, Viola expresses emotional vulnerability, inner conflict, and yearning.

The interjection *Ah* in the conative function in Shakespeare's comedies directs, influences, or appeals to another character. It focuses on the interaction between the speaker and the interlocutor, with the intent to persuade, command, provoke, or plead.

*Ah, sir, be patient! (As You Like It)* Here, *Ah* is used by Celia to implore her father to restrain his temper. The interjection somehow highlights her emotional appeal and softens the persuasive tone.

*Ah, you knaves! Will you mock us now? (Love's Labour's Lost)* Here, the speaker uses *Ah* to attempt to assert control or provoke a reaction. The interjection also emphasizes the teasing reprimand.

The interjection *Ah* in the phatic function in Shakespeare's comedies maintains or establishes the social connection and interaction between characters. In the phatic sense, it helps characters greet, respond, acknowledge, or keep conversations flowing.

*Ah, so it is, my friend. (As You Like It)* Here, the interjection affirms the speaker's attentiveness.

*Ah, indeed, a fair thought! (The Merchant of Venice)* The interjection signals agreement and keeps the interaction amicable and flowing.

Another interjection which is often used in Shakespeare's comedies is *Fie*. In the corpus, there are 15 instances of this interjection (1,8%), all of which convey an expressive function. The interjection *Fie* in Shakespeare's comedies often reveals strong emotions such as disapproval, frustration, shame, disgust, or indignation.

*Fie upon thee, man! There's no true drop of blood in thee. (Much Ado About Nothing)* Here, Beatrice uses *Fie* to express annoyance at Claudio's behaviour.

*Fie on him! He'll speak nothing but madman! (Twelfth Night)* Here, Maria expresses disgust at Malvolio's behaviour.

In some cases, *Fie* is repeated to intensify its meaning, as in the following:

*Fie, fie! What idle words are these? (Love's Labour's Lost)* Here, the interjection is used to scold the other men for breaking their oaths.

Regarding the rest of the interjections selected from the corpus, they are rarely used in comedies and are not as versatile as the interjection *O* or *Ah*. They

may be grouped according to the primary function they convey. And so, the interjections fulfilling the expressive function (apart from the ones described above) are the following: *Ah*, *ha*, *hi* (1 instance), *He*, *he* (1 instance), *Foh* (2 instances), *La* (5 instances), *O Fie* (1 instance), and *Tut* (1 instance). Of these interjections, only the interjection *La* additionally fulfils the pragmatic and conative function, but only one occurrence in each. A very large group of interjections is typically used in the conative function. They are the following: *Hey*, *Hilloa-loa*, *Hoa-hoola*, *Ho*, *ho*, *Ho*, *ho*, *ho*, *Hola*, *Holla*, *Lo lo*, *Lo now*, *lo*, *What hoa*, *Whoa*, *ho*, *ho*, *Whoa-ho-hoa*, *Whoa-ha-ho*, *What ho*, *Lo*, *Heigh-ho*, *Hey-ho*. The interjections *Heigh-ho* and *Hey-ho* are additionally used in expressive function; these interjections carry a reflective tone, often appearing in songs, asides, e.g.:

***Heigh-ho***, *the wind and the rain, /A foolish thing was but a toy... (Twelfth Night)*  
Here, *Heigh-ho* is used in a song, reflecting on life's inevitable hardships. The interjection expresses a resigned acceptance of life's foolishness and unpredictability.

To sum up, it can be claimed that Shakespeare used little of a rich repertoire of primary interjections in his comedies. He mainly used the interjection *O* in all three pragmatic functions according to Jakobson's model. In his comedies, the interjection *O* contributes to the play's emotional depth, humour, and social dynamics. Pragmatic functions refer to how language is used to achieve specific communicative goals beyond just conveying literal meaning, and Shakespeare's *O* often serves to express emotions, add emphasis, engage with other characters, or influence social interaction. Shakespeare's use of *O* is versatile, helping to convey the characters' emotions and intentions in a specific context. Similarly to *O*, the interjections *Alas*, *Ah* and *Ha* are used, i.e. they:

- 1) express strong emotions
- 2) they signal moments of discovery or outbursts of emotions
- 3) are used to address a character directly
- 4) signal moments of contemplation or self-reflection
- 5) are used to plead or ask for something

On the other hand, the interjections *Fie* and *Ho* are generally used in expressive and conative functions, respectively. In the case of the rest of the interjections selected from the corpus, it can be claimed that they:

- 1) occur very rarely in the analysed material
- 2) occur basically in one only pragmatic function

As a result of the analysis of the use of pragmatic functions in Shakespeare's comedies, it can be concluded that characters often use primary interjections to fulfil expressive and conative functions. In contrast, the phatic function is least



often expressed by employing interjections. The table below shows the number of interjections conveying particular pragmatic functions:

Table 2: Number of interjections conveying particular pragmatic functions

Pragmatic function	Number of instances	%
Expressive function	390	48
Conative function	391	48
Phatic function	37	4
TOTAL	818	100

It seems worth presenting a detailed analysis of the distribution of interjections according to their pragmatic functions across the thirteen Shakespearean comedies under analysis here.

Table 3: Distribution of interjections according to their pragmatic functions across Shakespeare's comedies

Comedy Title	Dominant Pragmatic Function of Interjections
All's Well That Ends Well	Conative
Two Gentlemen of Verona	Conative
Much Ado About Nothing	Cognitive
Merchant of Venice	Conative
Winter's Tale	Conative
Love's Labour's Lost	Cognitive
Merry Wives of Windsor	Conative
A Midsummer Night's Dream	Conative
Twelfth Night	Cognitive
The Tempest	Conative
As You Like It	Conative
Taming of the Shrew	Conative
Comedy of Errors	Cognitive

The table above allows us to draw the following conclusions:

1) Conative Function (391 interjections – 47.8%) is the most dominant function, especially prominent in *As You Like It* (41 instances), *The Tempest* (39 instances), and *The Winter's Tale* (37 instances). It indicates that interjections are frequently used to urge, command, persuade, or direct attention, reinforcing dramatic tension or comic urgency.

2) Cognitive Function (241 interjections – 29.5%) is found most often in *Twelfth Night* (36 instances), *Love's Labour's Lost* (34 instances), and *Much Ado About Nothing* (27 instances). It reflects moments of realization, confusion, thought processes, or intellectual engagement, which suggests that interjections serve here as markers of internal reasoning or dramatic irony.

3) Emotive Function (149 interjections – 18.2%) is predominant in *The Winter's Tale* (25 instances), *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (26 instances), and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (18 instances), where it is employed to express feelings (joy, sorrow, surprise, anger) enhancing the emotional expressiveness of characters, especially in heightened or tragicomic moments.

4) Phatic Function (37 interjections – 4.5%) is the least represented overall and most prominent in *The Taming of the Shrew* (19 instances) and *Love's Labour's Lost* (9 instances). It is used to establish, maintain, or disrupt communication, often in comical or mocking dialogue.

Interjections in Shakespeare's comedies have a universal character – they can express both positive and negative emotions, and their meaning often depends on the context of the scene. Shakespeare uses various forms, allowing for rich expression in dialogue. The analysis of the corpus concerning primary interjections and their pragmatic functions allows for several observations:

- Shakespeare used 44 different interjections, out of which five were used extensively in all three pragmatic functions analysed in the paper: *O*, *Ah*, *Ho*, *Ha* and *Alas*;

- The interjections *O*, *Ah*, *Ha* and *Alas* are used pretty universally as they serve to express all pragmatic functions; however, there is a huge difference in usage rates between the interjection *O* and the other three;

- The functions most often expressed through interjections are expressive and conative;

- Phatic function is the least often expressed through the use of interjections;

- The remaining primary interjections occur very rarely in the corpus material, and they serve basically to express one pragmatic function.

The analysis of the interjections and their functions has revealed that the interjection *O* can be described as an all-purpose interjection as it is used in 73% of instances and operates across multiple pragmatic functions. It may be claimed that Shakespeare's comedies exemplify the diverse use of *O* as a dramatic tool. The interjection often appears at moments of heightened emotional intensity, serving as a vocal marker for characters' inner disorder, joy, amazement or other emotions, e.g. *O brave new world!* used in *The Tempest*, conveying wonder and hope. The interjection *O*, contrary to the interjection *Oh*, is also regarded as universal, but in terms of its value, which is realizing or becoming aware of something (Drzazga 2021), is almost devoid of lexical meaning. It relies entirely

on intonation, context, and accompanying words to convey its functions in dialogues. This lack of specific meaning allows *O* to adapt flexibly to numerous contexts. The probable reason why Shakespeare uses the interjection *O* in his comedies is the very nature of the interjection: it is lexically empty so that it can be ascribed to numerous communicative situations, it is phonetically simple, consisting of a single vowel sound, which makes it easy to articulate, it can stand alone in the text, or it can be part of a larger phrase to strengthen its meaning, and finally, it is capable of expressing a broad spectrum of feelings. This paper is a pilot study of a broader corpus, specifically all of Shakespeare's works divided into tragedies, historical plays and poetry, from the point of view of the use of interjections and their pragmatic functions. It would be worth extending further research to include translations of the interjection *O* into Polish, considering that currently *O* is not used so often in theatre plays as a means of expression.

## **7. Pragmatic functions of primary interjections in relation to gender, social class, and individual character traits**

Shakespeare uses interjections with great precision, also as tools for character creation. They assist in expressing the characters' emotions, personalities, social standing, and connections with others, while also enriching the dialogue with depth and humour. This chapter examines the use of interjections in Shakespeare's comedies, focusing on their distribution by pragmatic function in relation to gender, social class, and individual character traits. It begins by exploring how interjections are distributed between male and female characters. The analysis then turns to the correlation between functions of interjections and the social class of characters. Finally, a character-level analysis, supported by several examples, reveals distinctive linguistic patterns and illustrates how interjections contribute to humour, shape interpersonal dynamics, and help individualize characters.

The results of the analysis show that male characters produce approximately 79% of all interjections in Shakespeare's comedies, a statistic that mirrors their dominance in speaking roles and overall dramatic control. This prevalence is particularly evident in the conative and cognitive functions of interjections, which are often used by male characters in positions of authority or influence, such as Leontes, Orsino, or Sir Toby, when persuading, commanding, or reflecting. In contrast, while female characters use fewer interjections overall, they display a proportionally higher use of emotive interjections (33 out of 169, or 19.5%, compared to males' 116 out of 649, or 17.9%). This suggests a tendency to associate female speech with emotional expression, aligning with traditional gendered portrayals of women as more emotionally transparent or vulnerable. Finally, the phatic function, which maintains or establishes social

connection, shows the lowest frequency across both genders, indicating that interjections in Shakespeare's comedies serve more often to drive character psychology and plot than to build rapport. Overall, the results point to a gendered distribution of interjection functions that mirrors broader thematic and structural conventions in Shakespeare's work: male dominance in action and authority, and female association with emotion and pathos.

Table 4: Gender-based distribution of interjections by pragmatic function across Shakespeare's comedies

Gender	Pragmatic Functions of Interjections				Total
	Emotive	Cognitive	Conative	Phatic	
Male	116	190	316	27	649
Female	33	51	75	10	169

As far as the social class distribution of primary interjections by pragmatic functions in Shakespeare's comedies is concerned, it varies notably by social class, with noble characters producing the majority across all pragmatic functions. They are especially dominant in the cognitive and conative categories. This aligns with their typical dramatic roles as persuasive, reflective, and rhetorically skilled characters who shape the direction of the plot. In contrast, lower-class characters, while having fewer interjections overall, contribute fourteen out of 37 phatic interjections, suggesting that their speech often serves to maintain social interaction, deliver comic relief, or attract attention. Emotive interjections are more balanced between social classes, with noble characters contributing 97 out of 149 interjections, and lower-class characters 27, indicating a somewhat broader emotional range but still reflecting the central narrative and emotional authority of the nobility. For example, in *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes, a nobleman, makes intense use of emotive, cognitive, and conative interjections, mirroring his psychological descent into jealousy and paranoia. Paulina, also of noble status, employs interjections primarily for conative and emotive purposes. In contrast, lower-class characters like the Clown and the Shepherd rely heavily on conative interjections, using them to generate humour and maintain social interaction. In *Twelfth Night*, noblemen such as Orsino and Sir Toby dominate the cognitive and conative domains, using interjections to assert authority and manipulate situations. Feste, the lower-class fool, operates across multiple functions, cognitive, phatic, and emotive, reflecting his unique, liminal role between social classes and dramatic modes. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, both Katherina and Petruchio use mostly phatic interjections during their sharp-tongued exchanges, where language becomes a weapon. Notably, phatic interjections are especially prominent in this play, often employed to heighten

Table 5: Social class distribution of primary interjections by pragmatic functions in Shakespeare's comedies

Social Class	Pragmatic Functions of Interjections				Total
	Emotive	Cognitive	Conative	Phatic	
Nobility	97	167	285	16	565
Middle Class	25	38	63	7	133
Lower Class	27	36	43	14	120

social tension and deliver a mocking tone, underscoring the performative and combative nature of dialogue.

The use of interjections in Shakespeare's comedies varies not only by gender and social class but also by individual character. A closer examination of the selected figures from *The Winter's Tale* and *Twelfth Night* reveals how pragmatic functions of interjections support characterisation, emotional tone, and dramatic purpose. Each character employs interjections in ways that reflect their personality, status, and narrative role, whether to assert control, express vulnerability, or foster comic interaction. In *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes, a male noble and king, uses a high number of conative, emotive, and cognitive interjections, reflecting his emotional instability and obsessive jealousy. His frequent conative interjections align with his authoritarian tone as he seeks to control those around him. Paulina, a noblewoman in *The Winter's Tale*, uses interjections primarily for conative and emotive purposes. Her high use of conative interjections reflects her assertive and confrontational speaking style, especially in scenes where she challenges Leontes' actions and defends the truth. Her emotive interjections add intensity to her language, expressing anger, grief, and compassion. Autolycus, a lower-class rogue, uses a mix of conative, cognitive, and emotive interjections. His speech is lively and deceptive, supporting his trickster persona and engaging the audience through phatic expressions like *Ha!* or *O*. Perdita, though of noble birth but raised as a shepherd's daughter, blends emotive, cognitive, and conative functions. Her interjections are tender and poetic, especially in romantic scenes, reflecting both her innocence and her emerging noble identity. Meanwhile, the Clown and Shepherd, representing the rural lower class, rely heavily on emotive and conative interjections to create humour. In *Twelfth Night*, Viola, a noblewoman in disguise, shows a predominance of cognitive interjections, reflecting her internal conflict and role in the play's themes of disguise and miscommunication. Orsino, the lovesick duke, uses interjections mostly for cognitive purposes. His melancholic tone is underscored by frequent uses of expressions like *O*. Olivia also transitions from grief to desire in her speech, incorporating in her speech emotive, cognitive, and conative interjections. Sir Toby Belch, a lower

nobleman, mixes cognitive, conative, and emotive functions, using interjections to mock, provoke, and maintain his role as the play's instigator of chaos. Feste, the lower-class fool, demonstrates a balanced use across cognitive, emotive, conative, and phatic interjections. His versatility reflects his position as a sharp observer and entertainer. For example, the interjection *Hey, ho* (singing a song) not only connects him to the audience but also reinforces his role as a musical, metatheatrical commentator.

In examining the character-level use of interjections in Shakespeare's comedies, it becomes clear that these seemingly minor linguistic elements serve significant dramatic and rhetorical functions. Whether used to assert control, express vulnerability, maintain social interaction, or inject humour, interjections are finely tuned to the character's gender, social status, and narrative role. This analysis reveals that interjections are not arbitrary but are carefully distributed to deepen characterisation, shape tone, and support the play's thematic concerns. Ultimately, interjections offer a subtle but powerful lens through which to observe the intersection of language, identity, and performance in Shakespeare's comedic world. We are aware that the analysis of the use of interjections in shaping character traits in Shakespeare's plays is rather superficial; however, its aim was merely to demonstrate, through a few examples, that interjections play a role in constructing the characterological features of dramatic character. The use of interjections to build personality profiles is a particularly interesting subject, one that requires the examination of a much larger number of characters and a much deeper analysis. Therefore, it seems worthwhile to devote more attention to this issue by conducting a much more detailed study, the results of which will be presented in a separate publication.

## 8. Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that interjections, though often overlooked, play a vital role in shaping the emotional and rhetorical fabric of Shakespeare's comedies. Far from being random or purely decorative, interjections are carefully distributed across characters based on their gender, social status, and dramatic function, used to assert control, express vulnerability, maintain interaction, or inject humour. Among the 44 interjections identified, *O*, *Ah*, *Ha*, *Ho*, and *Alas* stand out for their versatility across pragmatic functions, with *O* emerging as the most frequent and functionally flexible. Accounting for 73% of all interjectional usage, *O* acts as a universal marker of heightened emotion, self-awareness, and expressive intensity. Its lexical emptiness and phonetic simplicity allow it to adapt fluidly to varied dramatic contexts, making it a powerful performative tool. Moreover, the dominance of emotive and conative functions underscores Shakespeare's focus on dramatic persuasion and emotional resonance, while

phatic uses, though less frequent, highlight moments of comic relief or social bonding. The character-level analysis further illustrates how interjections help to construct individual voice and identity, enriching the texture of Shakespeare's dialogue. As a pilot study of a larger corpus, this work opens avenues for further research, particularly into how interjections like *O* function across genres or how they are translated into other languages, such as Polish, where their expressive value may differ in contemporary performance. Ultimately, interjections offer a subtle but revealing lens through which to explore language, performance, and meaning in Shakespeare's comedic world.

## Acknowledgments

With gratitude to my father, Professor Piotr Kakietek, for his academic guidance and for inspiring my interest in the language of Shakespeare, and to Krzysztof Stec, for his unwavering support and encouragement throughout this research.

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