

On the semantics and syntax of Taiwanese *V kah* exclamatives

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This study investigates the semantics and syntax of *V kah* exclamative constructions in Taiwanese, a variety of Chinese spoken in Taiwan. As illustrated in (1), a *V kah* exclamative consists of a scalar predicate followed by the particle *kah*. We show that the construction encodes two semantic properties that are generally assumed to underlie exclamatives: a presupposition of factivity and an extreme or extraordinary degree interpretation. As shown in (2), the fact presupposed by the content of the exclamative (namely, that the dessert is delicious) cannot be semantically contradicted by a subsequent utterance. This also accounts for the infelicity of the *V kah* example in (3), in which what is expressed in the second clause contradicts the fact presupposed by the preceding *V kah* exclamative. Regarding the extreme/extraordinary degree interpretation of exclamatives, the example in (4) shows that it is incompatible with a predicate that negates extremeness/extraordinariness. The same holds for the Taiwanese example in (5), in which the *V kah* exclamative is semantically incompatible with a negative predicate that downgrades extremeness/extraordinariness. Syntactically, we propose that the two semantic properties are realized by an abstract morpheme called FACT (Zanuttini & Portner 2003) and by the projection of DegP, respectively, as represented in (6). Following Watanabe (1993), we assume that the null morpheme FACT, which encodes factivity, is located in SpecCP. We also assume the existence of a null operator merged in DegP that binds a degree-variable in IP to ensure that the predicate receives an extreme or extraordinary degree interpretation. Furthermore, under our proposal, the final particle *kah* is analyzed as the head of SAP (Speech Act Phrase; Speas & Tenny 2003). This projection encodes the speaker's emotional reaction or attitude toward the extreme degree denoted by a scalar predicate. We argue that our analysis of *kah* as a sentence-final particle is superior to those of previous studies (Yang 2010; Lin 2022; Hsu 2024) which treat it as part of a compound verb in at least two respects. First, most Chinese sentence-final particles bear illocutionary force, and the analysis of speaker-oriented *kah* as a sentence-final particle conforms to this general pattern. Second, the sentence-final particle analysis is supported by matrix phenomena. As demonstrated in (7), since the speaker-oriented particle *kah* is merged as high as SAP, it cannot stay in a lower scope. Our analysis successfully accounts for the ungrammaticality of examples like (7). We conclude that our approach satisfactorily maps semantic properties onto syntactic structures.

Examples

- (1) *A-bi-a sui kah!*
A-bi-DIM beautiful KAH
‘How beautiful A-bi-a is!’
- (2) *#What a delicious dessert John baked! But I don’t find it very delicious.* (Chernilovskaya 2014: 49)
- (3) *#A-bi-a sui kah! M-koh goa bo kam-kok i tsioh sui e.*
A-bi-DIM beautiful KAH but 1SG NEG feel 3SG very beautiful PRT
‘How beautiful A-bi-a is! But I don’t find her very beautiful.’
- (4) *It is[#]isn’t amazing how very tall he is!*
- (5) *Hong-thai-thinn e tshai-ke u-iann[#]bo-iann kiann-si-lang,*
typhoon-day GEN vegetable-price really/NEG-really shocking
kui kah!
expensive KAH
‘Vegetable prices during typhoon days are really[#]not really shocking. How pricey!’
- (6) [SAP [SA’ [DegP Op_i [Deg’ Deg [CP FACT [C’ C [IP d_i-V]]]]]] [SA kah]]
- (7) **Gua kah-i [NP hit e sui kah e koo-niu].*
1SG like DEM CLF beautiful KAH REL girl
Lit.: ‘I like [the girl how beautiful (she is)!]’

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