Isogloss
Open Journal of Romance Linguistics

Received: 28-02-2024
Accepted: 17-09-2024
Published: 12-12-2024

Scaling Counterarguments: The Dynamics of Exclamative *Se* Constructions

Elena Callegari
University of Iceland
ecallegari@hi.is

How to cite: Callegari, Elena. 2024. Scaling Counterarguments: The Dynamics of Exclamative *Se* Constructions RLLT23, eds Lisa Brunetti, Ioana Chitoran & Alexandru Mardale. Special Issue of *Isogloss. Open Journal of Romance Linguistics* 10(7)/14, 1-27.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/isogloss.411

Abstract

This paper introduces *Exclamative* Se *Constructions* (ESCs), analyzing their use in two Romance languages: Trevigiano, a northern Italian dialect, and Standard Italian. ESCs are used to express shock or surprise at someone's statement and to challenge its accuracy. Although they resemble adverbial clauses, ESCs function autonomously as main clauses. I identify four defining properties of ESCs: adverbial clause form, form-function mismatch, main-clausality, and the anchoring of surprise to a preceding assertion rather than to the ESC's own propositional content. I argue that ESCs function as counterarguments, specifically rebutting assumed premises using contextually relevant scales. These rebuttals consistently involve asserting a value that contrasts sharply with some initial statement, often reaching an extreme or unexpected point on the contextually relevant scale.

Keywords: exclamatives, Romance, Northern Italian Dialects, counterarguments.

1. Introduction

In the paper, I explore a novel construction to which I refer as *Exclamative* Se *constructions* (ESC). I examine the occurrence of ESCs in two Romance languages: Trevigiano, an Italian dialect spoken in the Treviso province (north of Venice), and Standard Italian. An illustrative example of ESC in Italian is presented below:

(1) Italian
Se ti=chiamo ogni fine-settimana!
if 2SG.ACC=call.PRS.1SG every end-week
'What are you talking about, I call you every weekend!'

Constructions like (1) are generally used to express shock or surprise at someone's statement (some proposition *p*) and to question the accuracy of p. For example, (1) could be uttered in reaction to a comment made by the speaker's interlocutor about not communicating frequently, see for example the possible exchange in (2):

(2) A: "Non ci sentiamo mai"
'We barely talk anymore'
B: Se ti=chiamo ogni fine-settimana!
if 2SG.ACC=call.PRS.1SG every weekend
'What are you talking about, I call you every weekend!'[1]

Given the proposition p 'we barely talk anymore', asserted by A, the ESC construction is then used to convey shock or surprise that A would assert/believe p, and to negate the truth of p. ESCs are mostly confined to informal, spoken language and conversational contexts.

The use of an exclamation mark in (1) suggests a connection between ESC structures and *wh*-exclamative constructions. However, ESCs differ from run-of-the-mill *wh*-exclamatives (Zanuttini & Portner 2003) like (3-5), in that the latter, but not the former, feature a *wh*-element.

(3) What a nice guy he is!

(4) Trevigiano
Che beo che l'=è!
what beautiful that 3SG=be.PRS.3SG
'How beautiful it is!'

(5) Italian
Come corre questo ragazzo!
how run.PRS.3SG this boy
'How fast that boy runs!'

What stands out about ESCs is their form. In Standard Italian, ESCs are introduced by the morpheme *se* ('if') (hence the name *exclamative* se *constructions*). *Se* is also often preceded by the adversative connective ma (= but), although this is never mandatory. In Italian, *se* is used to introduce both embedded polarity questions and conditional adverbial clauses, yet ESCs are neither: the polarity of the ESC construction is not in question, and unlike actual conditional clauses, no superordinate main clause functioning as an antecedent is present in ESCs.

[1] A structurally isomorphic construction appears to exist in Spanish, as discussed by Schwenter (2016), where these constructions are referred to as *independent* si-*clauses*.

Across different languages, we observe variability in the syntactic configurations taken on by ESCs; this is highlighted by the differences between Trevigiano and Italian. While Italian ESCs are introduced by *se*, in Trevigiano, *co* ('when') is used instead, as shown in (6). Note that (6) is pragmatically and semantically equivalent to (2):

(6) Trevigiano
A: 'We never talk anymore'
B: Co te=ciamo tuti i dì!
when 2SG.ACC=call.PRS.1SG all the days
'What are you talking about, I call you every day!'

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines ESCs' defining features. I identify four key properties of ESCs: adverbial clause form, form-function mismatch, main-clausality, and surprise being anchored to a preceding assertion rather than the ESC's own propositional content. In section 3, I compare ESCs to free conditionals (Lombardi Vallauri 2016), arguing that the two constructions should be kept distinct. Section 4 analyzes corpus occurrences of ESCs in the *Paisà* Corpus to identify the pragmatic contexts in which ESCs are employed, noting their frequent reliance on a contextually salient scale. In Section 5, I present my analysis of ESCs as constructions that rely on contextually relevant scales to rebut an assumed premise. In Section 6, I examine two structures that are similar to ESCs: *ma* exclamatives, and counter-expectational *ma* questions. Section 7 then provides a tentative explanation for why ESCs are parasitic on adverbial clause syntax. Section 8 is a concluding section.

2. Key characteristics of ESCs

In this section, we will examine key characteristics of ESCs. The goal is to establish criteria that set ESCs apart from other constructions that may share a similar structure or meaning.

The first characteristic is that, in form, ESCs *resemble adverbial clauses.* The clearest indication that, formally, ESCs take the form of adverbial clauses comes from observing ESCs in Trevigiano. If we were to focus solely on Italian ESCs, the form of these constructions might not be immediately evident, since, as mentioned in the introduction, in Italian a clause introduced by the morpheme *se* can either be an embedded polarity question, as illustrated in (7), or serve as the protasis of an adverbial conditional clause, as shown in (8):

(7) Italian
Mi domando **se** **Patrizia** **sia** **più**
1SG.REFL wonder if Patrizia be. SBJV.3SG more
riuscita **ad** **ottenere** **il** **brevetto di pilota.**
succeed.PTCP.F to obtain the license of pilot
'I wonder if Patrizia ever managed to obtain her flying license.'

(8) Italian

Se	**Patrizia**	**non**	**si**	**sbriga**,	perderà
if	Patrizia	not	REFL	hurry.PRS.3SG	miss.FUT.3SG
l’	autobus.				
the	bus				

‘If Patrizia doesn’t hurry up, she will miss the bus.’

Trevigiano clarifies that the structure in question is indeed an adverbial clause rather than an embedded interrogative because Trevigiano employs distinct morphemes for the two structures. *Co*, a syntactic head, is used to introduce temporal adverbial clauses, as seen in example (9). For embedded interrogatives (10), Trevigiano requires the use of the wh-word *quando*, which must be followed by the complementizer *che*, reflecting Trevigiano's non-adherence to the doubly-filled COMP filter. *Quando* is also used to realize matrix temporal interrogatives, as shown in (11).

(9) Trevigiano

Co	te=rivi	casa,	manda=me
when	2SG.NOM=arrive	home	send.IMP.2SG=me.DAT
un	messaggino.		
a	text		

‘When you get home, send me a text.’

(10) Trevigiano

Ghe	go		domandà	quando	che	/	*co	
3SG.DAT	have.PRS.1SG		asked.PTCP	when	that	/	when	
ga	da	rivar	so	fio.				
must.PRS.3SG	of	arrive.INF	her	son				

‘I asked her when her son is supposed to arrive.’

(11) Trevigiano

Quando	rivi=tu?
When	arrive.PRS.2SG=you.NOM

‘When will you be arriving?’

The second key property of ESCs is *form-function mismatch*: although ESCs take the shape of various types of adverbial clauses, their meanings diverge significantly from those of the adverbial clauses they resemble. For instance, while the Trevigiano ESC in example (6) might resemble a temporal adverbial clause, it is not used to temporally anchor an event or state the way a genuine temporal adverbial clause like (12) does:

(12) My dad left when I was 7.

In (12), the event mentioned in the matrix clause is temporally situated within a specific timeframe by the state described in the ‘when’ clause (Sæbø 2011). In (6), on the other hand, there is simply no matrix clause whose described event is temporally anchored by the mention of the speaker ‘calling every day’.

In this respect, ESCs resemble *wh*-exclamatives, in that both constructions formally resemble other structures of which they do not fully match meaning nor function. Specifically, *wh*-exclamatives mimic the structure of interrogatives but lack their illocutionary force, i.e. they cannot be used in question/answer pairs, as noted by Zanuttini & Portner (2003).

The third characteristic is *main clausality*: while ESCs adopt the form of subordinate adverbial clauses, they function autonomously as main clauses, appearing unembedded. It is important to note that ESCs are not merely examples of *suspended* adverbial clauses, i.e. adverbial structures where the main clause is present but is given null phonetic realization because its meaning is fully recoverable from context. A first argument against a suspended analysis of ESCs is that it is unclear what the alleged elided antecedent would look like exactly, as none of the possible options seems to account for both the structure *and* the intonation pattern of ESCs. The examples below offer two different attempts to convey the essence of the ESC structure from examples (1) and (6) using constructions that include both a subordinate clause and a main clause, with varying degrees of success:

(13) Italian
Se ti=chiamo tutti i weekend, perché
if 2SG.ACC=call.PRS.1SG all the weekends, why
dici che non ci=sentiamo mai?
say.PRS.2SG that not REFL=hear.PRS.1PL never
'If I call you every weekend, why do you say that we never talk?'

(14) Italian
Dici che non ci=sentiamo mai quando in
say.PRS.2SG that not REFL=hear.PRS.1PL never when in
realtà ti=chiamo tutti i weekend!
reality 2SG.ACC=call.PRS.1SG all the weekends
'You say that we never talk when in reality I call you every weekend!'

We could hypothesize that the underlying structure of (1) is (13), where the conditional clause ('If I call you every weekend') sets up a condition under which the speaker is questioning the statement made by their interlocutor ('Why do you say that we never talk?'). One could then argue that (1) is simply (13), but with the *why* question being elided. However, the illocutionary force of (1) differs from (13): (1) makes an assertion, while (13) has the form of a question. (13) requires the interlocutor to produce an answer, whereas no answer is expected after uttering the ESC structure in (1). Broadly speaking, beyond the illocutionary force, positing an elided main clause does not account for the exclamative intonation pattern intrinsic to ESCs. If an apodosis were implied, one would expect a hanging or suspended tone rather than the distinctive exclamative intonation we observe.

Furthermore, while (13) might explain the conditional form of Italian ESCs, it would still be unclear why ESCs take the form of temporal adverbials in Trevigiano, because the following example hardly makes any sense, in either Italian or Trevigiano:

(15) *Quando ti=chiamo tutti i weekend, perché
when 2SG.ACC=call.PRS.1SG all the weekends, why
dici che non ci=sentiamo mai?
say.PRS.2SG that not REFL=hear.PRS.1PL never?
'When I call you every weekend, why do you say we never talk?'

Assuming that (14) is the underlying structure would help us capture the exclamative intonation pattern of ESCs and explain their resemblance to temporal clauses in Trevigiano (= example (6)). However, this interpretation leaves us without a clear explanation for their conditional nature in Standard Italian. Moreover, using a temporal adverbial clause as an ESC structure is entirely unacceptable in Italian, as shown in (16):

(16) A: 'We never talk.'
B: *Quando ti=chiamo tutti i giorni!
when 2SG.ACC=call.PRS.1SG all the days

The final defining feature of ESCs is that the *surprise* they convey is *anchored to a preceding assertion rather than to the ESC's own propositional content*. This distinction becomes clear when we attempt to convert an ESC into a standard declarative statement and embed it under a predicate like 'it's surprising/amazing'.[2] ESCs carry a presupposition that the speaker finds some state of affairs unexpected or noteworthy; embedding an ESC under an 'amazing' predicate allows us to determine whether this reaction is tied to the proposition's explicit content or to some implicit meaning.

We see that embedding an ESC under an 'it's amazing' predicate significantly alters the meaning of the original ESC statement, as illustrated by the contrast between (17B´) and (17B´´). Both (17B´) and (17B´´) are attempts to capture the meaning of (17B) and serve as possible responses to A's assertion:

(17) A: 'We never talk anymore.'
B: Se ti=chiamo ogni fine-settimana!
if 2SG.ACC=call.PRS.1SG every end-week
'What are you talking about, I call you every weekend!'

[2] The "embeddability under 'it's amazing' predicates" test was extensively employed by Zanuttini and Portner (2003) to analyze exclamatives, building on a concept introduced by Elliott (1974). Elliott observed that while exclamatives cannot be embedded under positive predicates like 'it's amazing', they can be embedded under their negative counterparts, such as 'it isn't amazing'. Zanuttini and Portner use this test to argue that exclamatives introduce a conventional scalar implicature, suggesting that the proposition they denote occupies the extreme end of a contextually given scale. In contrast, my use of the "embeddability under 'it's amazing' predicates" test focuses on determining which proposition it is that the speaker finds surprising -whether it is the proposition currently being uttered or some proposition that was previously mentioned.

B´: #È incredibile che ti=chiami
be.PRS.3SG incredible that 2SG.ACC=call.SBJV.1SG
ogni fine-settimana!
every end-week
'It's incredible that I call every weekend!'
B´´: È incredibile che tu dica ciò!
be.PRS.3SG incredible that you say. SBJV.2SG that
'It's incredible that you would say this.'

(17B´) is pragmatically odd as a response to A's assertion. This awkwardness arises because, in (17B´), the surprise is incorrectly attributed to the literal proposition (that the speaker calls every weekend) rather than being focused on A's initial statement. In contrast, (17B´´) correctly captures the intended meaning by shifting the focus of the amazement to the act of saying the previous statement. Here, the surprise is appropriately anchored to the preceding assertion ('We never talk anymore'), preserving the ESC's original function of expressing disbelief and contradiction. The contrast in (17B´-B´´) shows that ESCs inherently encode a level of surprise or emphasis that is directed towards some proposition in the preceding discourse, rather than their own descriptive content.

Compare (17) to what happens if a standard *wh*-exclamative structure is embedded under an 'It's amazing/surprising' predicate:

(18) a. How tall he is!
b. It's surprising/amazing how tall he is.

(18b) is a faithful rendition of the meaning of (18a). This highlights a clear distinction between ESCs and typical exclamative constructions, where the surprise or amazement is explicitly tied to the content of the utterance itself.

To conclude, we have identified four properties that are characteristic of ESC structures:

i) Semblance of adverbial clauses
ii) Form-function mismatch
iii) Main clausality
iv) Anchoring of surprise to a preceding assertion rather than to the ESC's propositional content

3. Free conditionals

In a (2016) study, Lombardi Vallauri investigates a type of construction to which he refers as *insubordinated* or *free conditionals*. Free conditionals are sentences that are introduced by the conditional marker *if*, and which thus resemble conditional clauses, yet stand alone with autonomous pragmatic functions and with no connected main clause.

In his article, Lombardi Vallauri specifically focuses on Italian, though as the author points out, free conditionals appear to be a much more general phenomenon,

having been observed in German, Spanish, Japanese, English, Swedish, and Finnish (Buscha 1976, Almela Pérez 1985, Schwenter 2016, Ohori 1995, Stirling 1999).

According to Lombardi Vallauri, Italian free conditionals can be used to express a variety of meanings, among which we find posing a generic question about future outcomes, expressing protest, invitation/offer/request, and conveying resignation. An illustrative example of a free conditional that is used to convey an invitation/offer/request is provided in (19), where the free conditional is used to politely ask the listener to provide the speaker with a specific page number.[3]

(19) Lombardi Vallauri (2016: 146, his glosses)
H: non mi ricordo comunque posso vederlo perché c'ho il giornale qua
'I don't remember, however I can check because I have the newspaper here'
C: ahah vediamo un momento questi due Valpolicella e Soave perché_
'haha let me see these two Valpolicella and Soave because_'
H: se mi dice la pagina_ se mi dice la pagina
if to.me tell the page if to.me tell:2sg the page
'if you tell me what page'
C: la pagina allora trentatrè
'the page yes thirty-three'

Example (20) then illustrates the *conveying resignation* type of free conditionals, indicating that no action can alter the situation due to insurmountable obstacles or factors beyond control:

(20) Lombardi Vallauri (2016: 148, his glosses)
B: me so' dimenticato […] che avevo questo biglietto del cinema che poi […] s'è sprecato perche' era solo per il mese d'ottobre
'I forgot […] that I had this ticket for the movies which then […] was wasted because it was only for October'
A: d'altra parte va be' se te sei scordato
from.the.other side goes well if you be forgotten
'on the other hand well if you have forgotten'
B: mah va be'
never mind

ESCs appear to coincide with what Lombardi Vallauri categorizes as *exclamatory* free conditionals. According to the author, these can serve to contest the content of the preceding statement, effectively conveying that what has just been said is incorrect, inappropriate, or irrelevant. Examples of what Lombardi Vallauri classifies as exclamatory free conditionals are provided in (21) and (22):

[3] All free conditional examples in this section are from Lombardi Vallauri (2016), who takes them from the *LIP* corpus, a corpus of spoken Italian (De Mauro et al. 1993). The free conditionals are highlighted in bold. The glosses are presented as they appear in Lombardi Vallauri's paper.

(21) Lombardi Vallauri (2016: 149, his glosses)
poi a dirti la verità io mica lo so se lui conosce veramente l'italiano
'to tell you the truth I don't know if he really knows Italian'
A: scusa se lui ha parlato durante una conferenza in italiano
sorry if he has spoken during a conference in Italian
'sorry, if he spoke Italian during a conference'

(22) Lombardi Vallauri (2016: 149, his glosses)
D: signor giudice io ci ho sessantasei anni so' più vecchio pure de lui
'your honour I'm sixty-six I'm even older than him'
E: **se ci hai un anno più de me**
if there have:2sg one year more of me
'If you are one year older than me'

The question then arises whether ESCs are merely a subclass of free conditionals, thus obviating the need for a separate analysis. I argue that this is not the case, suggesting instead that ESCs -or what Lombardi Vallauri calls *exclamative free conditionals*- should be recognized as distinct from examples like (19-20). There are several reasons for treating ESCs as a separate category, which I outline below.

The first reason is obvious: unlike free conditionals, which take the form of conditional clauses, ESCs do not necessarily conform to this structure across all languages, as evidenced by Trevigiano, and as we will see later on, German. This variability suggests that the phenomenon ESCs represent is more complex and multifaceted than that of standard free conditionals, justifying separate categorization.

The second reason pertains to what was discussed in section 2 concerning the main clausality of ESCs, and the fact that it is difficult to determine exactly what a possible antecedent would look like where ESCs to be analyzed as suspended conditionals. Unlike what we observed for ESCs, reintroducing an overt apodosis in free conditionals does not alter the fundamental meaning or intonation of the construction; in fact, adding an overt apodosis feels very natural. Consider for instance example (19): in (23), we are adding an apodosis (in bold) to the conditional structure. The resulting sentence perfectly captures the intended meaning and structure of (19):

(23) Se mi=dice la pagina **controlliamo**
if 1SG.DAT=say.PRS.3SG the page check.PRS.1PL
subito.
immediately
'If you tell me the page, we can check immediately.'

The same holds for (24), another example of free conditional: (24a) represents the original structure, as found in the LIP, while (24b) represents a version of (24a) where the elided apodosis is given an overt realization (in bold):

(24) a. se poi tu 'n l'hai inito ma se il concetto c'è tutto_ #
if then you not it.have.2SG inished but if the concept there.is all
'if then you haven't inished it but if the concept is all there…'

b. se poi tu 'n l'hai inito ma se il concetto c'è tutto,
if then you not it.have.2SG inished but if the concept there.is all
va **bene** **lo stesso**.
go.PRS.3SG well the same
'if then you haven't inished it but if the concept is all there_it's still fine.'

Because of this, I argue that examples like (19-20) are in fact instances of suspended conditionals, i.e. conditional structures where the apodosis is implied but elided. Note that this is the possible analysis of ESCs against which we argued in Section 2. An analysis of free conditionals as suspended clauses goes contra Lombardi Vallauri (2016), who argues that free conditionals are intonationally, semantically and pragmatically self-sufficient. Note however that he also concedes that these structures are not yet fully conventionalized as free-standing structures; he places free conditionals within an intermediate stage of Evans' (2007) insubordination hierarchy, suggesting that most can still be viewed as subordinate clauses with an implied main clause, whose meaning is always easily recoverable.

A third reason to keep ESCs separate from free conditionals is that ESCs inherently convey shock or surprise that the interlocutor has uttered a proposition p, something which is central to their function. They express a strong emotional response to p, a defining characteristic that differentiates them from the broader category of free conditionals, which may not necessarily possess this emotive quality. Moreover, while free conditionals can serve various pragmatic functions (like offers, requests, or expressing resignation), ESCs specifically function to counter a preceding statement. This specialized pragmatic role of rebuttal is a key differentiator that underscores the distinct nature of ESCs.

Finally, as I will argue in detail in section 5, the meaning of ESCs involves a contextually relevant scale, which is crucial for their interpretation. This scalar aspect, where a certain point on the scale is emphasized to rebut a proposition, is not a standard feature of all free conditionals.

In summary, while Lombardi Vallauri's analysis of free conditionals offers valuable insights into the emergence and function of suspended conditionals, ESCs possess unique properties that warrant a distinct analysis. Their divergence in form, their true insubordinate nature, and the specific ways in which meaning is inferred and conveyed highlight the need for a separate analytical framework to fully understand their role and usage in communication.

4. Corpus study

To understand how ESCs are used in natural conversations, I conducted a corpus search study. The specific objective of this corpus search was to pinpoint the contexts in which ESCs are utilized to determine if unelicited, real-life examples of ESCs share common characteristics.

For this analysis, I resorted to the Paisà corpus (Lyding et al. 2014), an online repository of Italian web texts that have been tagged for easier searchability. The specific search query I employed was: <s>[word="ma"][word="se"], which yields 110 hits. These 110 instances were then manually reviewed to filter out irrelevant

constructions, such as actual conditional clauses. This left me with 17 relevant examples, i.e. actual ESC structures.[4]

If we analyze these 17 examples of ESCs, we see that a pattern quickly becomes apparent: in the majority of these instances (15 out of 17 examples), the interpretation of the ESC construction is clearly dependent on degrees on a scale.
Typically, ESC examples involve two participants: the speaker who employs the ESC, and their interlocutor. The interlocutor might be a real person, such as another participant in an online chat conversation (given that the Paisà is a corpus of web texts, many of the entries are from chat dialogues), or an indirect or imagined interlocutor. Often, the interlocutor asserts or implies a medium or low position on a given scale, whereas the speaker resorting to the ESC indicates a position at the opposite end of the scale. In example (25), we see a clear illustration of this:

(25) lo zio poi ha cercato di sdrammatizzare, “no, era una cacca normale”, ma la zia è intervenuta con le mani appena ripulite “normale? ma se era un mare di fango!”
‘The uncle then tried to play it down, “no, it was a normal poop”, but the aunt intervened -she had just washed her hands-, “normal? that was a sea of mud!”’

In (25), if we assume a scale like {tiny, normal, big, a sea of mud}, the uncle asserts *normal(p)*, while the aunt asserts *sea-of-mud(p)*, placing their assertions at opposite ends of the scale.

Additional examples of ESCs are provided in (26-29):

(26) “questione irrisolta per motivi oscuri”??? **ma se sono chiarissimi**!!
‘“An unresolved issue for obscure reasons”??? They are extremely clear!!’

In example (26), given a scale such as *{obscure, somewhat clear, clear, crystal clear}*, the speaker asserts *crystal-clear(reasons)*, in contrast to an imagined or indirect interlocutor who has claimed *obscure(reasons)*. In (26), the ESC is used to express disagreement by positioning the speaker’s perspective at the opposite, more extreme end of a conceptual scale: the speaker is responding to a statement (possibly encountered on a website or in another form of written communication) by asserting a starkly different evaluation on the implied clarity scale.

(27) oddio oddio non ci credo a quello che ho letto, il programma alla fine ha floppato??????? **ma se ha sempre e sempre superato la media di rete in queste 6 puntate** , solo perchè poi è calato è un flop ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ?
‘Oh my god, I can’t believe what I’ve read, “did the program ultimately flop”??????? It has always exceeded the network’s average in these 6 episodes, just because it then dropped, is it a flop???????????’

In example (27), the relevant scale seems to be one of success or performance, particularly in the context of a television program's ratings or viewership over time. The scale here could range from ‘complete failure’ to ‘outstanding success’, with various degrees of (un)success in between, for example: *{complete failure, below*

[4] The full list of examples is available at this link.

expectations, average, above average, outstanding success}. In (27), the speaker is contesting the notion that the program is a flop (which would place it on the 'complete failure' end of the scale) by asserting *above-average(program)*.

(28) Via Tabacchi quella con più imprese al femminile!? **ma se conta 4 negozi messi in croce**, forse si intende in percentuale rispetto al totale negozi della via?
'Via Tabacchi, the one with the most female-owned businesses!? But it only has 4 stores in total at best, maybe it's meant as a percentage of the total stores on the street?'

In (28), the initial statement sets up an expectation of a significant number of female-owned businesses ('the most female-owned businesses'), which is contrasted with the reality of that specific street only having '4 stores at best'. The statement 'maybe it's meant as a percentage' attempts to reconcile these views by suggesting that while the absolute number might place the street lower on the scale, in terms of proportion, it could possibly still hold a significant place. The relevant scale in (28) then seems to be: *{no female-led businesses, a few female-led businesses, a moderate number of female-led businesses, many female-led businesses, predominantly female-led businesses, all businesses are female-led}*.

(29) E la Casa Bianca?!?! le diamo l'Oscar della faccia di bronzo impunita! "È assurdo che qualcuno solo pensi che dei marines sparino a civili!" **ma se ne ammazzano tutti i giorni di civili! ma se hanno sterminate intere famiglie di civili, ma se ai check point prima sparano poi chiedono, ma se hanno fatto il tiro al bersaglio su case civili, su scuole civili, su moschee civili, su ospedali civili, ma se hanno assassinato i civili per strade, i bambini civili, le civili feste di nozze, i civili nelle moschee...!**
'And the White House?! We should give it the Oscar for unabashed audacity! "It's absurd that anyone would even think that marines would shoot at civilians!" They kill civilians every day! They have wiped out entire families of civilians, at checkpoints, they shoot first and ask questions later, they have used civilian houses, schools, mosques, and hospitals for target practice, they have murdered civilians in the streets, civilian children, civilian wedding parties, civilians in mosques...!'

Example (29) is a complex example containing several connected ESC constructions, all of which are contrasted with the claim, possibly made by a different chat user, that the military would never engage in shooting civilians. A number of statements that are in direct opposition to this initial claim are then made by the speaker. To make sense of (29), we can assume a scale like *{no wrongdoing, isolated incidents, regrettable collateral damage, systematic misconduct, intentional and widespread violence}*. The speaker's imagined interlocutor asserted *no-wrongdoing(military)*, while the speaker is asserting that the opposite, most extreme degree in the scale is in fact what corresponds to reality.

What about the two examples from the Paisà whose interpretation does not seem to be connected to degrees on a scale? In one instance, the context provided is

simply insufficient to determine whether a scalar interpretation might also be at play. The other example is shown in (30):

(30) Parlavo di antisemitismo, la gente mi rideva in faccia, anche gli amici. “Ma se non esiste!”, dicevano.
‘I talked about antisemitism, people laughed at me, even my friends. “It doesn’t (even) exist!” they said’

The interpretation of example (30) is not as obviously linked to degrees on a scale as the other examples we have seen. In (30), the speaker is implicitly asserting *exists(antisemitism)*, while their interlocutors assert instead *not-exists(antisemitism)*. Given that something can only either exist or not exist, a proposed scale to account for (30) would only have two values and thus not be much of a scale: *{antisemitism exists, antisemitism does not exist}*.

5. ESCs as rebutters

I argue that the pragmatic function of ESCs is that of counterarguments.

Counterarguments involve the presentation of reasons against the acceptance of the conclusion of an extant argument (Rocci 2021: 143). Similarly, ESCs serve not just to express surprise or strong emotion but to actively challenge or refute a preceding statement, which aligns with the core function of counterarguments. ESCs provide a rebuttal to an interlocutor's claim, using the exclamative format to underscore the strength and immediacy of the rebuttal. Note that a counterargument analysis of ESCs also accounts for the presence of the adversative connective *ma* (‘but’) in Italian ESCs; *ma*, being an adversative connective, typically introduces a contrast or contradiction (see for instance Zeevat (2012)),[5] which is inherent in the structure of counterarguments.

According to Peldszus & Stede (2013), there are three types of counterarguments: *conclusion rebuttal*, *premise rebuttal* and *argument undercutting*. A conclusion rebuttal directly challenges a specific conclusion by presenting a new argument against it, as exemplified in the dialogue below. In (31), P stands for *Proponent* and A stands for *Attacker*.

(31) P: [We should tear down this building.]1 [It is full of asbestos.]2
A: [Tearing it down would be too expensive.]3

In (31), the attacker provides an argument (the proposition 2) that opposes the proponent's conclusion (proposition 1) without disputing the premise's validity (proposition 3).

The rebutter of a premise is exemplified as follows:

(32) P: [We should tear down this building.]1 [It is full of asbestos.]2
A: [Yet, nobody made a precise assessment of the degree of contamination.]3

[5] Zeevat (2012) argues that *but* functions primarily as an objection marker rather than merely an additive or contrastive conjunction.

In (32), A is rebutting the premise put forward by P. The premise in question is ‘The building is full of asbestos’, which serves as a foundational reason for P's conclusion that ‘We should tear down this building’. When A states ‘Yet, nobody made a precise assessment of the degree of contamination’, they are challenging the validity or robustness of the initial premise. They are not directly contesting the conclusion that the building should be torn down; instead, they are questioning the underlying assumption that the building is full of asbestos to a degree that warrants demolition.

In a more general sense, a rebutter is simply an attack on the truth or acceptability of propositional content in the argumentation, be it the premise or the conclusion. In particular, Peldszus and Stede acknowledge that rebutters, whether targeting a proposition's conclusion or premise, operate similarly in undermining an argument. However, they also suggest that attacks on premises specifically challenge the “argument’s cogency” (Peldszus and Stede, 2013:9), implying that such rebuttals question the argument’s overall persuasiveness or logical force.

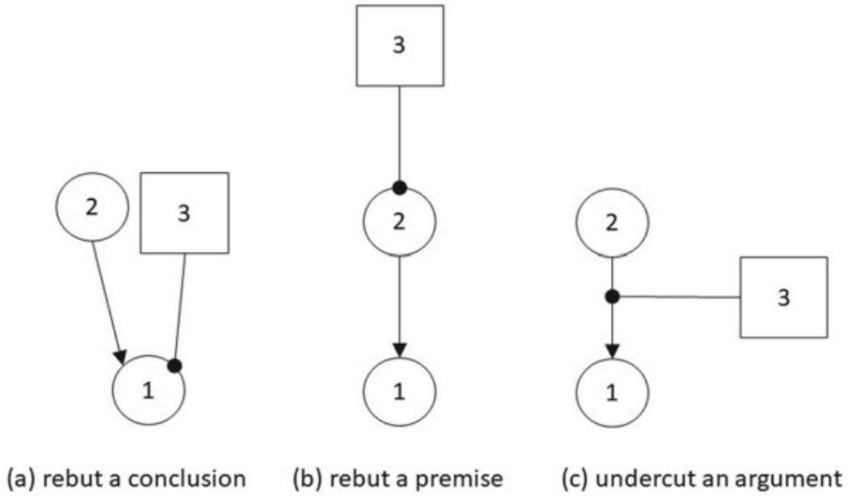
The third form of counterargument attack identified by Peldszus and Stede is known as the undercutter. This strategy is exemplified in dialogue in (33):

(33) P: [We should tear down this building.]1 [It is full of asbestos.]2
A: [The building might be cleaned up, though.]3

Undercutters challenge the link between a premise and its conclusion by highlighting potential exceptions that weaken or invalidate the inferential step from premise to conclusion.

Figure 1 visually represents the three types of counterarguments using the annotation framework developed by Peldszus and Stede (2013). In their framework, propositional units appear as numbered circles. Arrows point from premises to conclusions, illustrating support relationships. Rebuttals are marked with squares, and full circles indicate direct contradictions.

Figure 1: Types of rebutters according to Peldszus and Stede (2013).



Source: Peldszus & Stede (2013: 8).

I argue that ESCs serve to *rebut an existing assumed premise*. We can observe the premise rebutter function in the antisemitism example shown in (30): the speaker,

by talking about antisemitism, implies that it must exist. The speaker's interlocutors however attempt to rebut such a premise by claiming that antisemitism does not in fact exist.

Another example of a premise rebuttal through ESC is the following:

(34) A: 'Stop the car and shift to neutral.'
B: Ma se è verde!
but if be.PRS.3SG green
'(Why should I stop the car?) The traffic light is green.'

In (34), the implicit premise of A's assertion seems to be that the traffic light is red, and hence that B must stop the car. B's rebuttal then goes to tackle the validity of such premise, resulting in B stating that the traffic light is in fact green. Further discussion might however clarify that B has assumed the wrong premise in support of A's assertion. For example, the following could be an acceptable continuation to (34):

(35) A: 'I know the traffic light is green, but that police car just signaled us to stop, so stop we must.'

Example (35) shows that the proposition that ESCs go to rebut may both (i) be implicit, and (ii) represent a premise that B assumes underlies A's statement.

Consider now the 'I call you every weekend' ESC exchange originally presented in (2). I suggest that the proposition p that B goes to rebut in (2) is the implicitly assumed premise that if A is asserting that A and B never talk, it must be the case that A assumes that B never calls. This is shown in Figure 2:

Figure 2: 'I call every weekend' example with Peldszus & Stede's (2013) notation.

Once again, further conversation might reveal that this assumption that B has drawn concerning the logical premise of A's assertion is incorrect. For example, (36) might be uttered by A to signal to B that they are assuming something incorrect:

(36) 'I am not disputing the fact that you call every weekend, because you do, but the connection is so bad the majority of times we barely manage to talk at all.'

Recall the observation made in Section 4 on the basis of corpus data that almost all ESC examples seem to operate on degrees on a scale. To account for that, I posit that ESC rebutters are mediated by the presence of a contextually relevant scale: in ESC constructions, speakers utilize entailments based on these contextually relevant scales to challenge and rebut an assumed premise.

To illustrate how this works, let us revisit the 'I call every weekend' example. Let us assume a contextually relevant contrast set like *{never, (...), (only) once every month, once every weekend},* which is relevant for the interpretation of (2). A formal analysis is provided in (37); in (38), the logic of (37) is applied to the specific example in (2). In an ESC exchange, speaker A asserts some proposition p. A's interlocutor B utters a second proposition q (the ESC structure). Proposition q entails the falsity of the original proposition p because q entails the falsity of a third proposition r, whose falsity necessarily entails the falsity of p. Importantly, these entailments follow because q and r sit on opposite ends of a contextually relevant scale.

(37) Assuming three propositions, p, q and r.
A asserts p.
B asserts q, where $r \Rightarrow p \wedge q \Rightarrow \neg r$

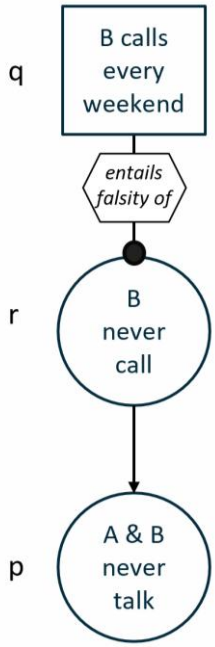
Since q = True, r =False.
Since r = False, p= False
($q \Rightarrow \neg r$ because q and r are on opposite ends of a contextually relevant scale)

(38) A: 'We never talk' = True
B: 'I call every weekend' = True.

If 'I never call' is True, then 'We never talk' must also be True.
Yet 'I never call' must be False, since 'I call every weekend' is True, and 'I call every weekend' being True entails 'I never call' being False.

In (38), q being True entails r being False because, given a contextually relevant contrast set like {*never, (...), (only) once every month, once every weekend*}, B asserting that they call every weekend renders false all other weaker claims in the set. This is also illustrated in the diagram representation in Figure 3:

Figure 3: "I call every weekend" example with entailments.



I contend that scalarity is an intrinsic feature of ESCs, and that ESC rebuttals consistently involve asserting a value on a contextually relevant scale that not only contrasts with the original proposition but does so in a way that reaches towards an extreme or unexpected end of such a scale. This contrast is systematic and significant, as the ESC is used to assert a point that sharply opposes the initial statement.

Assuming that the interpretation of ESCs is tied to degrees on a scale accounts for the unfelicitousness of replies (39a) and (39b) in the exchange in (39):

(39) A: Sei cattivo.
be.PRS.2SG mean.M.SG
'You are mean.'
B:
a. *Se non sono cattivo!
if not be.PRS.1SG mean.M.SG
'If I am not mean!'
b. *Se sono buono!
if be.PRS.1SG good.M.SG
'If I am good!'
c. Se sono un angelo!
if be.PRS.1SG an angel
'If I am an angel!'

As (39) shows, an ESC structure cannot be used to merely negate the polarity of an existing proposition (=39a), nor to simply assert the direct opposite of p (=39b). Rather, the ESC must be used to assert a point on the scale that significantly contrasts with the initial proposition, reaching towards the extreme end of the scale, as illustrated in (39c) where being an 'angel' is a hyperbolic counter to being 'mean',

thus emphasizing a position far removed from the original claim within the scale of goodness.

How, then, should we interpret the antisemitism example in (30)? I propose that examples like (30) can still be understood through a scalar analysis provided that we consider broader, contextually relevant scales that extend beyond simple lexical gradability. In particular, a plausible scale for interpreting example (30) could be one that measures the impact or consequences of antisemitism. This scale would range from acknowledging its catastrophic consequences to outright denying the existence of antisemitism: {*antisemitism has catastrophic consequences, antisemitism has significant consequences, antisemitism has some consequences, antisemitism has no consequences, antisemitism does not exist*}. While this scale may seem slightly unconventional, it logically transitions from evaluating the impact of antisemitism to questioning its existence altogether. This captures the notion that denying the existence of antisemitism is an extreme form of downplaying its impact or consequences. In the exchange in (30), the response *Ma se non esiste!* ('It doesn't (even) exist!'), where the interlocutor is denying the existence of antisemitism, functions as a rhetorical strategy to completely negate the speaker's concern about its impact. This extreme position on the scale not only dismisses the severity of antisemitism but also challenges the very premise of the initial statement, thereby reinforcing the rebuttal in a forceful and absolute manner.

The existence of examples like (30) suggests that the scales on which ESCs operate can be highly flexible, accommodating a broad spectrum of contexts and interpretations beyond straightforwardly scalar notions based on the discourse context, speaker intentions, and listener interpretations. I posit in particular that while scalarity is always a core component of ESCs, this can manifest in different ways depending on the context. Scales in ESCs can thus be both lexical and conceptual. Lexical scales involve gradable predicates (e.g., cold, colder, coldest), whereas conceptual scales may be built around more abstract notions, such as impact or significance as seen in (30). This flexibility means that the same ESC might be interpreted differently depending on the surrounding context or the shared knowledge between the speaker and listener.[6]

---

[6] As an example of this variability, consider the following ESC:

i)	Ma	se	è	verde!
	But	if	be.PRS.3SG	green
	'But it/she/he is green!'			

This ESC could be uttered in response to both a sentence like 'This fruit is ripe' and a statement 'She's fully ready to take on the leadership role'. However, the implied scale would differ significantly in each context. In the first case, the scale would refer to the ripeness of the fruit, with 'green' implying that it is unripe and therefore not ready for consumption. In the second case, 'green' could be interpreted metaphorically, suggesting that the person is inexperienced or not mature enough for the leadership role.

It is worth noting that ESCs bear similarities to conversational implicatures in their reliance on context and their role in shaping meaning beyond the explicit content of the utterance. Like conversational implicatures, ESCs require the interlocutor to infer the intended meaning, often through a process of understanding the implied rebuttal of the preceding statement.

It is also noteworthy that some native Italian speakers found example (30) to be less acceptable than the other examples with clearer gradable properties, though (30) is perfectly acceptable to me. This variation in acceptability may reflect differences in sensitivity to the scale requirement of ESCs, further highlighting the nuanced and context-dependent nature of these constructions. This variability does not undermine the scalar foundation of ESCs but rather illustrates how different speakers may perceive and construct these scales based on their individual experiences and contextual understandings.

6. *Ma* questions and *ma* exclamatives

The goal of this section is to compare ESC constructions with counter-expectational *ma* questions and *ma* exclamatives, given the similarities these constructions share with ESCs. An example of each is provided below:

(40) Giorgi (2018: 3, her glosses)
Counter-expectational surprise yes-no questions
Context: Mary calls me on the phone and tells me that she has a new red dress to wear at tonight's party. When I meet her at the party, I see that she has a blue dress. I'm surprised and say:
Ma non era rosso?
But not was.IMPF red
'But wasn't it red?'

(41) Giorgi (2018: 4, her glosses)
Ma *exclamatives*
Context: Mary informs me that she is going to buy her wedding dress. Later she shows me her purchase and I see that it is a red gown, an unusual color for this kind of dress. I may react by saying:
Ma è rosso!
But is.IND red!
'But it's red!'

The structure in (40) is an example of what Giorgi (2018), who is the first to formally investigate these constructions in Italian, describes as *counter-expectational surprise yes-no questions* (see also Vicente 2010 on counter-expectational questions). According to Giorgi (2018), key characteristics of counter-expectational surprise questions include a distinct falling-raising intonation pattern; accompanying non-verbal cues such as hand gestures, head movements, and eyebrow-raising; the use of the imperfect form of the indicative mood; the presence of the adversative particle *ma*; the presence of negation.

Structures like (40) have the form of yes/no questions, and yet, according to Giorgi, a *yes* or *no* answer would be perceived as pragmatically inappropriate or odd:

(42) Giorgi (2018: 12, her glosses)
But not was.IMPF red
'But wasn't it red?'

a. # Sì, era rosso.
Yes. It was red
b. # No, no era rosso.
No, it wasn't red

According to Giorgi, this is because, in (40), the individual posing the counter-expectational question is not seeking confirmation about the dress being red, as they are already aware of this fact. Instead, their intent is to understand the reasons behind the dress's red color, which contradicts their expectations about its expected color.

Counter-expectational yes/no questions bear obvious similarities to ESCs: both structures are exclamative in nature, and both structures can (or must, in the case of counter-expectational *ma* questions) be introduced by the adversative morpheme *ma*. While there are similarities between ESCs and the counter-expectational questions described by Giorgi (2018), several differences are notable. First of all, ESCs are assertive statements rather than questions: they are primarily used to challenge or refute a prior claim, not to seek clarification. Secondly, the verb in ESCs is not confined to the imperfect tense; it can appear in various tenses depending on the context and intended meaning. Thirdly, the adversative *ma* is not a mandatory component of ESCs, although its presence is common and aligns with their function as counterarguments. Finally, ESCs necessarily include the conditional marker *se*, a feature that differentiates them from Giorgi's counter-expectational questions, which do not require this morpheme.

Let us now compare ESCs with exclamative *ma* structures, such as the one in example (41). The sole structural distinction between a typical Italian ESC and *ma* exclamatives lies in the presence of the conditional marker *se* in the former, which is absent in the latter. This distinction raises the question of how the meaning of structures like *ma è rosso!* ('but it's red!') differs from the meanings of ESCs. To answer this question, it is useful to examine the types of preceding contexts that would be pragmatically appropriate for an ESC and a *ma* exclamative should these be minimal pairs. This analysis can be facilitated by adapting Giorgi's 'red dress' example to create an ideal minimal pair, as shown in (43). A possible preceding context for (43a) would then be (44). Compare that with (45):

(43) a. Ma se è verde!
but if be.PRS.3SG green
'But if it's green!'
b. Ma è verde!
but be.PRS.3SG green
'But it's green!'

(44) A: 'Stop the car and shift to neutral.'
B: Ma se è verde!
but if be.PRS.3SG green

(45) Context: The sun is no longer in Lucia's eyes, so she can now see the traffic light properly.
Lucia: Ma è verde!
but be.PRS.3SG green

In both (44) and (45), the illocutionary force of the structure is that of an assertion: the speaker is asserting that the traffic light is green. While both examples convey a sense of surprise about a certain state of affairs, the source of this surprise differs between the two constructions. This distinction becomes evident if we apply the 'it's amazing' test we have employed in Section 2: the 'it's amazing' rendition of the original sentence effectively captures the meaning of (45), but not that of (44).

(46) A: 'Stop the car and shift into neutral.'
B: # È sorprendente che sia verde!
be.PRS.3SG surprising that be.SBJV.3SG green
'It is surprising that it is green!'

The rebuttal in (46) does not accurately capture the intended meaning of (44), indicating that the surprise lies elsewhere, not in the color green itself. Compare with (47):

(47) Context: The sun is no longer is Lucia's eyes, so she can finally see the traffic light properly.
Lucia: È sorprendente che sia verde!
be.PRS.3SG surprising that be.SBJV.3SG green
'It is surprising that it is green!'

In contrast, (47) effectively captures the intended meaning, as the surprise directly pertains to the traffic light being green. Lucia could have believed the traffic light was red, misled by the sun's glare making her perceive red as the color that was lit, only to realize her mistake once the sun's blinding effect ceased. In this sense, the fact that the traffic light was green would have indeed been surprising to her.

The difference between (44) and (45) is captured by the contrast in (48):

(48) a. ESC → It's green, hence it's surprising that you would ask me to stop the car.
b. *Ma* exclamative → It's green, and that's unexpected/surprising (e.g. because I was sure the traffic light was still red).

We can conclude that while both ESCs and *ma* exclamatives assert a state of affairs that runs counter to existing expectations, ESCs carry an additional layer of meaning. This additional layer is a responsive element that specifically ties the sense of surprise or unexpectedness not to the ESC's explicit descriptive content, but to an implicit proposition -often a prior statement made by someone else- that the ESC seeks to rebut.

6.1. A note on exclamatives and assertions

Throughout this paper, I have referred to ESCs as assertions, arguing for instance that ESCs involve "asserting some proposition q that entails the falsity of the original proposition p", or that ESCs have "the illocutionary force of assertions". I believe that treating ESCs as assertions is justified, as ESCs convey information that directly responds to and counters a preceding assertion, which aligns with one of the core

functions of assertions in discourse. At the same time, by calling ESCs *exclamative* se *constructions*, I have drawn an explicit connection between ESCs and *wh*-exclamatives. I believe that this connection is valid due to several key overlapping features:

a) Degree interpretation: I have argued that the interpretation of ESCs is tied to degrees on a conceptually relevant scale. This is similar to what has been suggested by Zanuttini & Portner (2003) for *wh*-exclamatives.
b) Extreme degrees: both ESCs and *wh*-exclamatives convey an extreme degree on a scale. For *wh*-exclamatives, this is captured by the concept of *widening* (Zanuttini & Portner, 2003), where the speaker emphasizes an extreme point on a scale of intensity or magnitude. Similarly, in ESCs, the speaker asserts a point on the scale that sharply contrasts with the interlocutor's initial proposition, reaching toward an extreme or unexpected end of such scale.
c) Heightened emotional response: both constructions arguably involve a heightened emotional response from the speaker. In *wh*-exclamatives, this response arises from the contravention of an expectation, where the situation or state of affairs described by the exclamative is surprising or unexpected to the speaker. For example, in the *wh*-exclamative 'How tall he is!', the speaker expresses surprise or amazement at the degree of someone's tallness, indicating that an expectation has been violated or exceeded. The exclamative thus captures the speaker's affective stance toward this unexpected situation (Michaelis & Lambrecht 1996). In ESCs, the emotional response is driven by the speaker's surprise or shock at the interlocutor's proposition, which the ESC then rebuts.

Given these shared properties, it is plausible to consider ESCs and *wh*-exclamatives as related phenomena that are part of a larger class of exclamative utterances -possibly also including structures like Gras & Sansiñena's *indicative exclamative constructions* in Spanish (Gras & Sansiñena 2017). However, this connection complicates the classification of ESCs as assertions because the illocutionary force of (*wh*-)exclamatives is debated. Scholars such Zanuttini & Portner (2003), and Rett (2011) have argued that exclamatives have their own type of illocutionary force, which is distinct from assertions. They propose that exclamatives, rather than asserting propositions, primarily function to express heightened emotional states or surprise, thereby distinguishing them fundamentally from assertions, which are typically grounded in conveying information that can be confirmed or denied.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to resolve the broader debate over whether all exclamative constructions should be classified as assertions, I would like to highlight recent work by Trotzke and Giannakidou (accepted) that challenges the traditional view of exclamatives as having a unique illocutionary force distinct from assertions. Trotzke and Giannakidou propose that exclamatives are a type of "emotive assertion" that communicates the speaker's emotional reaction to a proposition, presupposing its intensity. Contrary to previous claims, they argue that exclamatives carry assertive content, as their descriptive content can be denied. This emerging perspective lends support to the idea that treating ESCs as assertions is a plausible stance.

7. Why adverbials?

As already discussed in Section 2, with ESCs we see a mismatch between form and function. For example, while ESCs in Trevigiano take the form of temporal adverbial clauses, they are not used to anchor an event temporally. This trend becomes even more obvious if we look beyond Romance languages. Consider for instance the following example of ESC in German; we see that in German, locative adverbial clauses are used to express the ESC meaning.

(49) German
A: 'We never talk anymore.'
B: Wo ich dir (doch) jeden Tag anrufe!
where I you (doch) every day call
'What are you talking about, I call you every day!'

This raises the question of why seemingly arbitrary adverbials are employed to express ESCs.

To explain the emergence of free conditionals in Italian and other languages, Lombardi Vallauri (2016) draws on Evans' (2007) framework outlining the stages of insubordination. Insubordination is a process that results in a formally subordinate clause becoming reanalyzed as a main clause, with its usage as a main clause becoming conventionalized. According to Evans (2007), this process features four different stages, which are outlined in (50):

(50) Subordination > Ellipsis > Conventionalized Ellipsis > Reanalysis as Main Clause

Lombardi Vallauri suggests that most free conditionals are in between Stages 2 and 3: the fact that the apodosis of free conditionals is fully recoverable has led to the apodosis being elided, and the ellipsis is slowly becoming conventionalized.

Although this sequence provides a plausible explanation for the emergence of genuine free conditionals, it falls short of accounting for ESCs. On the one hand, we have seen that it is difficult to speculate on what the missing matrix clause could look like, casting doubt on the notion that this ended up being omitted over time due to being fully recoverable. Furthermore, the significant cross-linguistic variation in the realization of ESCs that we have noted, with ESCs manifested through conditional, temporal, and locative adverbial clauses, suggests that ESC meaning is merely parasitic on adverbial syntax, rather than the specific form of the adverbial clause influencing ESC interpretation.

I would then like to suggest that this cross-linguistic variability originates from languages compensating for the absence of a dedicated ESC structure by repurposing available syntactic structures, specifically, adverbial syntax, and that this is because adverbials typically provide context regarding the circumstances (temporal, locative, conditional, etc.) under which events in the main clauses occur. For instance, in example (51), the conditional delineates the circumstances under which the apodosis holds true.

(51) If I call every weekend, you will be happy

In ESCs, a proposition p is negated by affirming q, where q is incompatible with p. Hence in all situations in which q equals True, p must necessarily return False. Both adverbial clauses and ESCs delineate circumstances impacting the truth conditions of a relevant proposition p. The difference between ESCs and (51) is that, in ESCs, this circumstance is the circumstance that renders p false rather than the condition that makes it true.

Conditional adverbial clauses in particular are well suited to expressing counterfactual or hypothetical scenarios, as they often frame situations that are contrary to fact or explore potential outcomes that have not actually occurred. This capacity for counterfactual expression aligns with the rebuttal nature of ESCs, where the speaker presents an alternative viewpoint that directly challenges and undermines the original assertion.

Finally, the interpretation of adverbial clauses is inherently flexible; they often leave room for interpretation regarding the exact nature of their relationship with the main clause. Consider example (52):

(52) John left the party when Mary arrived.

In (52), the adverbial clause ‘when Mary arrived’ can be interpreted in multiple ways in relation to the matrix ‘John left the party’. One possible interpretation is that John left the party because Mary arrived. Here, the adverbial clause provides a causal relationship between Mary’s arrival and John’s departure. Another interpretation is that John left the party immediately after Mary arrived, with the adverbial clause simply denoting the timing of John’s action without implying causation. It is also possible to interpret the sentence as stating a coincidence: John happened to leave the party at the same time Mary arrived, without any causal or temporal implication beyond mere simultaneity.

The ambiguity that is inherent in the interpretation of adverbial clauses can be leveraged in various discourse contexts to convey nuanced meanings or to prompt the listener to infer specific relationships based on additional context or conversational cues. This inherent flexibility might make adverbial clauses particularly apt for repurposing in constructions like ESCs, as ESCs require a nuanced, flexible interpretation of the relationship between the ESC statement and the proposition p that the ESC goes to rebut. In Section 5, I have argued that the contextually salient scales on which ESCs rest are flexible, and can accommodate a broad spectrum of contexts and interpretations beyond straightforwardly quantifiable contexts. In the context of ESCs, such ambiguity and flexibility may allow the ESC to set a scene or context that can vary in its interpretive relationship with the proposition p it is rebutting.

8. Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper has explored the intricate dynamics and multifaceted nature of *Exclamative Se Constructions* (ESCs), shedding light on their unique role within discourse.

We have established that ESCs, while superficially resembling adverbial clauses, function autonomously as main clauses. Functionally, ESCs serve to express counterarguments, enabling speakers to challenge and rebut a proposition p by

negating the truth of some proposition r, where r is the assumed premise of p. ESCs rebuttals are mediated through contextually relevant scales, where proposition r and the ESC assertion (=proposition q) sit on opposite ends of the scale.

Across different languages, ESCs may take the form of conditional, temporal or locative adverbial clauses. To account for this variability, I have suggested that languages compensate for the absence of dedicated ESC structures by repurposing available syntactic structures, specifically, adverbial syntax, leveraging adverbials' capacity to provide contextual circumstances. I have also suggested that the inherent flexibility and ambiguity in the interpretation of the relation between adverbial clause and connected matrix clause aligns well with the demands of ESCs, allowing them to adaptively counter premises within varied discourse contexts and assumed scales.

References

Almela Pérez, Ramón. 1985. El si introductor de oraciones independientes en español. *LEA: Lingüística española actual* 7(1): 5–14.

Buscha, Annerose. 1976. Isolierte Nebensätze im dialogischen Text. *Deutsch als Fremdsprache* 13(5): 274–279.

De Mauro, Tullio, Mancini, Federico, Vedovelli, Massimo, & Miriam Voghera. 1993. *Lessico di frequenza dell'italiano parlato.* Milano: ETAS libri.

Elliott, Dale E. 1974. Toward a grammar of exclamations. *Foundations of language* 11(2): 231–246.

Evans, Nicholas. 2007. Insubordination and its uses. In Irina Nikolaeva (ed.), *Finiteness: theoretical and Empirical Foundations*, 366–431. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Farkas, Donka F., & Yoko Sugioka. 1983. Restrictive if/when clauses. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 6: 225–258. doi.org/10.1007/BF00635644

Giorgi, Alessandra. 2018. Ma non era rosso? (But wasn't it red?): On counter-expectational questions in Italian. In L. Repetti, & F. Ordóñez (eds), *Selected papers from the 46th Linguistic Symposium on Romance Languages (LSRL)*, 69–84. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. doi.org/10.1075/rllt.14.05gio.

Gras, Pedro, & María Sol Sansiñena. 2017. Exclamatives in the functional typology of insubordination: evidence from complement insubordinate constructions in Spanish. *Journal of Pragmatics* 115: 21–36.

Haegeman, Liliane. 2012. *Adverbial Clauses, Main Clause Phenomena, and Composition of the Left Periphery: The Cartography of Syntactic Structures, Volume 8.* Oxford Studies in Comparative Syntax. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lombardi Vallauri, Edoardo. 2016. Insubordinated conditionals in spoken and non-spoken Italian. In N. Evans, & H. Watanabe (eds), *Insubordination*, 145–169. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Lyding, Verena, Stemle, Egon, Borghetti, Claudia, Brunello, Marco, Castagnoli, Sara, Dell'Orletta, Felice, Dittmann, Henrik, Lenci, Alessandro, & Vito Pirrelli. 2014. The PAISÀ Corpus of Italian Web Texts. *Proceedings of the 9th Web as Corpus Workshop (WaC-9), Association for Computational Linguistics, Gothenburg, Sweden, April 2014*, 36–43.

Michaelis, Laura A., & Knud Lambrecht. 1996. Toward a construction-based theory of language function: The case of nominal extraposition. *Language* 72(2): 215–247.

Ohori, Toshio. 1995. Remarks on suspended clauses: a contribution to Japanese phraseology. In M. Shibatani, & S.A. Thompson (eds), *Essays in Semantics and Pragmatics: In honor of Charles J. Fillmore*, Pragmatics and beyond new series, 201–218. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. doi.org/10.1075/pbns.32.11oho

Peldszus, Andreas, & Manfred Stede. 2013. From argument diagrams to argumentation mining in texts: A survey. *International Journal of Cognitive Informatics and Natural Intelligence* (IJCINI), 7(1): 1–31.

Rett, Jessica. 2011. Exclamatives, degrees and speech acts. *Linguistics and philosophy*, 34: 411–442.

Rocci, Andrea. 2021. Diagramming counterarguments: At the interface between discourse structure and argumentation structure. *The language of argumentation*, 143–166.

Sæbø, Kjell Johan. 2011. Adverbial clauses. In K. von Heusinger, C. Maienborn & P. Portner (eds), *Semantics: an international handbook of natural language meaning*, 1420–1441. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.

Schwenter, Scott. 2016. Independent *si*-clauses in Spanish. Functions and consequences for insubordination. In N. Evans & H. Watanabe (eds), *Insubordination*, 89–112. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. doi.org/10.1075/tsl.115.04sch

Stirling, Lesley. 1999. Isolated if-clauses in Australian English. In P. Collins & D. Lee (eds), *The Clause in English*, 273–294. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. doi.org/10.1075/slcs.45.18sti

Trotzke, Andrea, & Anastasia Giannakidou. 2024. Exclamation, intensity, and emotive assertion. *Theoretical Linguistics.* doi.org/10.1515/tl-2024-2022

Vicente, Luis. 2010. On the syntax of adversative coordination. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 28: 381–415.

Zanuttini, Raffaella, & Paul Portner. 2003. Exclamative clauses: At the syntax-semantics interface. *Language* 79(1): 39–81.

Zeevat, Henk. 2012. Objection marking and additivity. *Lingua* 122(15): 1886–1898.