



## **‘I’m surprised’/‘Are you surprised?’. Surprise as an argumentation tool in verbal interaction”**

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Agnès Celle/Laure Lansari\*

‘I’m surprised’/‘Are you surprised?’:

Surprise as an Argumentation Tool in Verbal Interaction\*\*

## Résumé

Cet article vise à rendre compte de la contribution de l’adjectif attribut *surprised* à l’organisation de l’argumentation dans le dialogue en anglais actuel. On remarque qu’il n’y a pas de consensus sur le statut émotionnel de la surprise. Pour certains (comme Ortony *et al.* 1999) la surprise ne fait même pas partie du domaine des émotions. Nous considérons que l’interaction verbale peut aider à définir les lexèmes de surprise. Il est ainsi frappant que la réaction de surprise soit en décalage par rapport à l’expression linguistique de la surprise. Plus précisément, une réaction de surprise ne se manifeste pas nécessairement dans l’emploi de l’adjectif *surprised*. Vice versa, l’emploi de cet adjectif peut être le reflet d’une réaction non pas émotionnelle mais plutôt émotive, selon la distinction entre communication émotionnelle et communication émotive de Caffi et Janney (1994). Nous soutenons ici que la fonction émotive de l’adjectif *surprised* est exploitée pragmatiquement par les locuteurs dans l’interaction verbale.

## Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to account for the contribution of the predicative adjective *surprised* to the argumentative organization of dialogue in present-day English. Strikingly, there is no consensus in the literature on the emotional status of surprise. Some scholars even reject surprise from the realm of emotions (Ortony *et al.* 1999). Looking at verbal interaction may help to provide a semantico-pragmatic definition of surprise lexemes. Crucially, a discrepancy may be observed between the reaction of surprise and the linguistic expression of surprise. More specifically, a spontaneous reaction of surprise does not necessarily manifest itself in the use of the adjective *surprised*. Conversely, the use of this adjective may reflect not an emotional reaction, but rather an emotive one – according to the distinction between emotional communication and emotive communication made by Caffi and Janney (1994). It is argued in this

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chapter that the emotive function of the adjective *surprised* is pragmatically exploited by speakers in verbal interaction.

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to analyze the predicative use of the adjective *surprised* in verbal interaction and to account for its contribution to the argumentative organization of dialogue. The data sample used for this qualitative study is made up of dialogue sequences drawn from novels (750,000 words) and from the first three seasons of the American series *In Treatment* (280,000 words). The results are checked against the figures obtained from the *Corpus of American Soap Operas* (100 million words) – i.e., a genre- and register-related text corpus, but one which is quantitatively much larger. *In Treatment* is a drama about a psychologist and his weekly sessions with patients. Verbal interaction is part of a therapy in which patients discuss personal issues and interpersonal conflicts with their therapist with a view to uncovering problems and repairing relationships. Interestingly, the patient-therapist relationship becomes more complex in the course of the therapy, the therapist's self-doubt jeopardizing his position as a resolution expert. This corpus thus provides compelling evidence that emotion moves in intersubjectivity and dialogue. Our aim is to examine the role of language in this emotion process. More specifically, the focus is on first- and second-person utterances in the present tense which contain a copular verb such as *I am surprised*, *you are/sound surprised*, *are you surprised?* In these utterances, the emotive reaction involved is current, as opposed to reported.<sup>1</sup> This reaction may be asserted, inferred, or questioned, depending on the person and the type of utterance.

In Section 2, the theoretical issues raised by the analysis of surprise are outlined. In Section 3, correlations are shown to exist between the syntactic configurations observed and the semantic criteria defined in the literature on emotions. In Section 4, a pragmatic analysis is carried out. It is argued that displaying and attributing surprise constitute argumentative strategies which may reconfigure the intersubjective relationship.

## 2. Theoretical issues: how to analyze surprise from a linguistic point of view

Strikingly, there is no consensus in the literature on the emotional status of surprise. Ekman

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<sup>1</sup> Reported emotive reactions in third-person or past-tense utterances are deliberately left aside here in order to focus on current – and supposedly emotional – reactions. By narrowing our focus, we aim to show that even current reactions expressed in direct utterances may serve an argumentative or strategic function.

(1992, 169) regards surprise as the briefest emotion before it merges “into fear, amusement, relief, anger, disgust and so forth”. According to Ortony *et al.* (1999, 32), surprise does not qualify as an emotion on the grounds that “surprise can arise in the absence of a valenced reaction”. Along the same lines, Stein and Hernandez (2007) view surprise as a “general affective response”, not as an emotion.

From a linguistic point of view, a discrepancy may be observed between the reaction of surprise and its linguistic expression. Surprise manifests itself in silence, in spontaneous interjections, questions and exclamations, but not in the adjective *surprised*. Conversely, the use of the adjective *surprised* reflects not an emotional reaction, but rather an emotive one – following the distinction between emotional communication and emotive communication originally made by Marty (1908) and reprised in Caffi and Janney (1994). Emotional communication is regarded by Marty as “a type of spontaneous, unintentional leakage or bursting out of emotion in speech” (Caffi/Janney 1994, 328), as opposed to emotive communication, which, according to Marty, “has no automatic or necessary relation to ‘real’ inner affective states. Rather, it is related to self-presentation and it is inherently strategic, persuasive, interactional and other-directed by its very nature” (*ibid.*).

We argue here that the emotive function of the adjective *surprised* is pragmatically exploited by speakers in verbal interaction.

### 3. Syntactico-semantic correlations involving the subject complement *I’m/you’re surprised*

#### 3.1 *surprise*: a verb of psychological state

Verbs of psychological state express a stimulus that affects an experiencer. In English, as in French (see Ruwet 1994; Mathieu 2000), these verbs belong to different syntactic classes:

(1) Paul: *Perhaps you might not have loved Michaela because **you admired her** so much for being so... so perfect. (In Treatment)*

(2) Alex: *Michaela was making salmon – it’s always salmon on Tuesdays – and I told her I wanted to leave home. Let me tell you, she didn’t even turn her head away from the stove. She just said that, um... “I could have guessed this would happen.” And, “**You never surprise me**, Alex, not even now.” (In Treatment)*

*Admire* is an experiencer-subject verb, expressing the stimulus as the object. In contrast, *surprise* is a stimulus-subject verb (see Levin 1993, 189), expressing the experiencer as the object (X

*surprised me*).

### 3.2 Focus on the source: various syntactic configurations

Following Plantin (2011, 145), we prefer to use the term *source* rather than *stimulus*, because we regard the expression of emotions as a language construct, not as the reflection of a mechanical reaction to a stimulus.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the source of surprise is not limited to unexpected situations that the speaker finds surprising. Some event that both speaker and addressee are well aware of may also come as a surprise if the reason for that event is surprising to one of them.

In contrast to the psychological verb (*X surprised me*), the adjectival phrase *I am surprised/you are surprised* places the experiencer in the foreground and tells little about the source. The source may appear as a complement in the form of either a prepositional phrase:

(3) I'm surprised **at that reaction**. (*In Treatment*)

or a complement clause:

(4) I'm surprised **you didn't see it, how crazy I was about him**. (*In Treatment*)

(5) Are you surprised **that you, as you say, wound up here?** (*In Treatment*)

When the adjectival phrase is not followed by a complement, the source is not explicit:

(6) Mia: *I've just made an ass of myself, haven't I? I bet you're angry.*

Paul: *Maybe I am. Mostly, I'm... I'm surprised.*

Mia: *No, you're furious. I can see it all over your face.* (*In Treatment*)

(7) Paul: *I offered her to go to her house. She hung up and I called her back and I asked her if she'd meet me at the hospital in an hour.*

April: *She showed up?*

Paul: ***Are you surprised?***

April: *Did you meet her in my room?*

Paul: *No, in the lobby.* (*In Treatment*)

However, as pointed out by Rocq-Migette (2009, 228), “contrary to happiness or sadness, which are purely emotive, surprise is created by something which is external to the speaker. *I am*

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<sup>2</sup> According to Plantin (2012), “what triggers emotion is not an event ‘in itself’ but an event *under some perception*, i.e., linguistically, *under some description*. Emotion conflicts resulting from representation conflicts give credence to this position” (our translation).

*surprised* cannot be used without a situational or a textual context that provides the source of the feeling.” In (6), it is Mia’s behaviour that causes Paul’s surprise. In (7), Paul’s question is triggered by April’s disbelief at what he has been telling her and he wants to make sure that she is surprised by his narrative.

In the present tense, the source is taken to be factual, both speaker and addressee having access to it. What is at stake is the nature of the speaker’s or addressee’s current emotive reaction, not the agent, event or object that may have caused that reaction. The factual character of the source is part of some knowledge shared by speaker and addressee, which explains why the source may remain implicit and not appear at all.

Let us point out that, with *I am surprised*, the predicative adjective is more often than not followed by a complement (only two occurrences of our sample do not have a complement). When the subject is *you*, however, the complement is absent in half of the occurrences (see Section 4 below).

### 3.3 Semantic “dimensions”

Our aim is to correlate syntactic configurations with the various semantic dimensions put forward in the literature on emotions. In a recent article devoted to the lexicon of surprise and disappointment in French, Novakova, Goossens and Melnikova (2012) put forward four different criteria, namely intensity, aspect, causativity, and manifestation. They examine their contribution to the collocations of predicates denoting surprise and disappointment (verbs such as *surprendre*, *étonner*, *décevoir*, as well as corresponding adjectives and nouns), and uncover some systematic links between syntactic patterns and these semantic dimensions. In a more general study dealing with the pragmatics of emotions, Caffi and Janney (1994) contend that evaluation, potency and activity may well constitute the three main emotive categories in psychology as well as in linguistics.

We will concentrate here on manifestation, potency and evaluation, since the other dimensions do not seem relevant to the present case-study. Manifestation accounts for the collocations expressing how the experiencer discloses his/her emotions and how these emotions can be perceived by others. It is clearly a relevant parameter for interactions containing second-person utterances, since the pattern “*you* + copular verb + *surprised*” is often used when the speaker tries to infer what the addressee is feeling from the latter’s gestural, facial or prosodic features.

(8) Frances: *She had auditioned on a whim and gotten the lead. The title role.*

Paul: ***You sound surprised.***

Frances: *I was totally surprised. I never knew she was even interested in such a thing... Acting or the theater. (In Treatment)*

In second-person utterances, the speaker has indirect access to emotions, which are inferred, not declared (see Plantin 2012 on this distinction). Moreover, manifestation is associated with a syntactic characteristic – typically, there is no complement following the adjective *surprised* (*surprised* +  $\emptyset$ ). The results from the *Corpus of American Soap Operas* confirm this tendency: only 21 % of second-person utterances have a complement. With the verb *sound*, the figures drop to 2.5 %.

The “power, control, or potency” dimension is difficult to capture since it seems to subsume a great variety of phenomena, as Caffi and Janney themselves acknowledge (1994, 342). Potency mostly has to do with epistemic modality (Caffi/Janney 1994, 348), i.e., with the speaker’s epistemic stance – certainty/uncertainty – towards the element (agent, event or object) triggering emotion. The epistemic dimension is indeed of interest to the study of “*you* + copula + *surprised*”, since second-person utterances mainly appear in:

Interrogative sentences

(9) Amy: *Really, you worried about me?*

Paul: ***Are you surprised about that?***

Amy: *Mm, it’s nice to hear. Did you worry about Jake too? (In Treatment)*

Declarative sentences, especially with copular verbs such as *sound* or *seem*:

(8) Frances: *She had auditioned on a whim and gotten the lead. The title role.*

Paul: ***You sound surprised.***

Frances: *I was totally surprised. I never knew she was even interested in such a thing... Acting or the theater. (In Treatment)*

In both cases, the speaker attributes an emotion to the addressee but at the same time either questions the very existence of surprise (*cf.* (9)) or indirectly asks about the reason for being surprised in a tentative statement using modal evidential verbs (*cf.* (8)). In (8), emotion attribution is interpreted by Frances as an invitation to explain why she is surprised, and she goes on to explain why what happened totally contradicts her prior cognitive representations. When the subject is *I*, the adjective *surprised* only occurs in statements involving *be*.

Evaluation is of particular interest to the present study insofar as surprise is said to have neutral valence in itself (see Ortony *et al.* 1999, 127), as opposed to anger or fear, for instance. Given this neutrality, the context will then ‘colour’ the reaction of surprise with either a positive (e.g., *What a nice surprise!*) or negative (e.g., *We had a bad surprise when we arrived*) overtone. The valence of the surprise supposedly experienced by the addressee is not specified in any of the examples of our sample. However, the evaluative judgement that is formed about the source is generally negative. Let us first focus on first-person utterances. When the adjective is followed by a complement, which corresponds to the most frequent case (72 % of the first-person utterances in the *Corpus of American Soap Operas*), the source appears to be contrary to the speaker’s expectations:

(10) That isn’t a term I remember. I’m surprised **you do**. (Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale*)

In (10), elliptical *you do* stands for *you remember*, which stands in contrast to the first sentence *that isn’t a term I remember*. The fact that the addressee remembers the term is unexpected, given that the speaker herself does not remember this term. To put it schematically, the speaker expects non-p but is faced either with p or with a value different from p. The emotive reaction caused by unexpectedness expresses the speaker’s evaluation. According both to logic and to the speaker’s moral standards, what is actually the case should not be the case. Likewise, in the absence of a complement, the focus may be on the discrepancy between the speaker’s cognitive representation and the real world:

(11) **I’m surprised, I... actually thought** you’d have been down on all fours scrubbing away, and your wife standing over you shouting instructions and... you saying, “It’s not coming out, I don’t know what to do, my next patient’ll be here any minute.” **I didn’t think** it would come out that easily, that’s all. (*In Treatment*)

In this example, it is the context that provides the contrast between expectation and actual realization (*I actually thought; I didn’t think...*).

Turning now to “*you + copula + surprised*”, we can also see clearly that the attempt to attribute a reaction of surprise to the addressee, or to make the addressee acknowledge his or her surprise, is far from being neutral. What is foregrounded is likewise the problematic discrepancy between what was expected and the actual situation:



(12) Gina: ***Are you surprised at her reaction?** You put it on her and she threw it back.*  
Paul: ***How was I supposed...** Gina, you hammered me about this last week. You went on and on and on about... I knew it was a bad idea. And now I'm coming to you with this mess.*

Gina's question suggests that Paul should not be surprised by a patient's reaction. The negative undertone of the question is clearly felt by Paul, who then tries to counter-attack.

The evaluation dimension is crucial to our analysis and thus confirms the need for a larger discursive approach, one which takes into account pragmatic factors.

#### 4. Pragmatic exploitation

The way emotions are displayed and attributed to others is by no means neutral. Expressing emotions may be viewed as part of an argumentative strategy (Plantin 2011, 192). Emotions, whether displayed or concealed, are meaningful.

We have pointed out that first-person utterances imply a source of surprise that may be either implicit or explicit, both speaker and addressee having access to that source. Second-person utterances, however, are generally not followed by a complement. Our contention is that this syntactic distribution is correlated to different pragmatic goals.

##### 4.1 First-person utterances

In first-person utterances, the adjectival phrase may serve two pragmatic functions. It may be used to evaluate the source of surprise in a negative way, which amounts to blaming the addressee for it, and also to control discourse:

(13) Alex: *So I owe another 20 %? Thirty bucks. Hold on.*  
Paul: *Do you feel better now?*  
Alex: *What do you mean?*  
Paul: *After paying me, do you feel better?*  
Alex: *What are you trying to say?*  
Paul: ***I'm surprised** by how much effort you put into **showing your contempt** for this process and for me.*  
Alex: *Relax, OK? It's just the way my mother raised me. I don't know what it's like with you people but I like to pay for what I get.*  
Paul: ***I'm glad** you're getting something here, Alex.*  
Alex: ***Let's not make a big deal out of this, OK? You want me to admit that this therapy is worthwhile?** OK. I'll admit it. This therapy is changing my life. Happy? Can we drop it now?*

*I'm glad you're getting something here* is highly ironical and understood as such (*Let's not make*

*a big deal of it*). *I'm surprised by how much effort you put into showing your contempt for this process and for me* is an utterance that displays surprise in order to blame the addressee for showing a negative emotion – i.e., contempt. By expressing surprise, the speaker indirectly rebukes the addressee for the emotions he shows and the words he utters.

A corollary of this negative evaluation is the speaker's attempt to control conversational interaction:

(14) "Was Far my father?"

"There wasn't much to be said for my husband, lille Swanny, but he wouldn't have betrayed his own wife. He wasn't as bad as that. **I'm surprised** you can suggest it."

Swanny said she screamed. She screamed out and covered her mouth. "**You're surprised! You're surprised!** You tell me these things and **you're surprised** at what I say."

Asta was quite cool and calm. "Of course **I'm surprised** when you speak like that to your mother."

"You're not my mother, you've just said so. Is it true?" (Rendell, *Asta's Book*)

A shift can be observed from *I'm surprised you can suggest it* to *Of course I'm surprised when you speak like that to your mother*, in response to the addressee's exclamation *You're surprised!*. The first occurrence of *I'm surprised* has scope over a specific situation (*you can suggest it*). The second, however, has scope over an iterative situation. The source of surprise is then said to be not the content of Swanny's suggestion, but the way she speaks to her mother. This shift indicates that Asta is in full control of conversational interaction, which is corroborated by the preceding narrative sentence, *Asta was quite cool and calm*. The adjectives *cool* and *calm* might seem to be in contradiction with the adjective *surprised* from an emotional point of view. From an argumentative point of view, however, this co-occurrence is evidence that the adjectival phrase is used to exert control over discourse.

#### 4.2 Second-person utterances

As stated in Section 2, second-person utterances correspond either to:

- a question aiming at confirming the speaker's assessment of the addressee's emotional state, or
- ~~or~~ a tentative statement regarding the addressee's emotional state

In either case, the speaker is trying to attribute and label an emotion that the addressee has not clearly acknowledged in his/her own discourse. We argue that this attempt represents an intrusion into the addressee's private feelings, and constitutes a strategy to make the other verbalize and explicitly acknowledge what had hitherto been left unexpressed. As with first-person utterances,

what is at stake here is how emotions are used within a specific argumentative strategy. However, the absence of a complement in most of the instances suggests that the speaker relying on “*you + copula + surprised*” wishes to leave the source of surprise in the background. Rather, his/her intention is to focus on the addressee’s emotional state – and to make the addressee aware of this particular state. All the occurrences under scrutiny display the same scenario:

Stage 1: Speaker A experiences surprise but does not express it with surprise lexemes.

Stage 2: Then, speaker B either asks “Are you surprised?” or asserts “You sound/seem surprised”.

Stage 3: Speaker A reacts in various ways to speaker B’s question or assertion.

In our sample, stage 2 may be associated with two slightly different pragmatic strategies. It may be regarded as an indirect way to express reproach, or it may be part of the psychoanalyst’s maieutics in an attempt to steer discourse. These pragmatic exploitations are examined in more detail below.

Case 1: “*You + copula + surprised*” may be part of the psychoanalyst’s maieutics to uncover some problematic behaviour or pathological pattern in his patients.

(9) Paul: *So... how do you feel?*

Amy: *Fine. Were you worried?*

Paul: *Yes. Very.*

Amy: ***Really, you worried about me?***

Paul: ***Are you surprised about that?***

Amy: *Mm, it’s nice to hear. (In Treatment)*

Paul has sensed Amy’s insecurity and his question aims at making her aware that there is no reason why she should doubt his concern. In other words, the question does not bear on the existence of surprise but on the underlying reasons for this reaction of surprise. *Are you surprised?* is to be interpreted as *Why are you surprised?*. This explains why no complement is needed, the source of surprise being less important than the reason for it.

The same kind of maieutics may be at play with statements involving evidential verbs:

(15) Frances: *I kept telling myself, “don’t worry, Frances, it’s like riding a bicycle.”*

Paul: *And was it?*

Frances: *He took off my shirt and touched me, and I thought I was gonna lose it. I mean, he loved my breasts.*

Paul: ***You sound surprised.***

Frances: *I’m not 25 or synthetic, if you know what I mean. And he just kept kissing them and*

*touching them. Well, I forgot how sensitive they are. Are you shocked? (In Treatment)*

Here, Paul thinks that his patient needs to clarify the perception she has of her own body, especially since breast cancer runs in the family.

In case 1, attributing surprise is felt by the addressee as a justified intrusion into his/her feelings as part of the ongoing psychoanalytic process and no negative judgement is involved. We argue that it is nonetheless an attempt to control, or at least steer, the conversation. It should be stressed that the patient's responses do not involve *yes* or *no*, but constitute explanations of their emotional states, which confirms that these questions and modalized statements are less concerned with the existence of surprise than with the reason for it.

Case 2: In other verbal exchanges, attributing surprise is inherently linked to negative judgement and serves as a kind of exposure that destabilizes the experiencer. In our sample, case 2 is to be found exclusively in questions.

(16) Laura: *You know, um, next month I'll be 30 and I've been thinking to myself, "I've hated myself for 30 years." It's enough. I don't want to any more.*

Paul: *Why do you hate yourself?*

Laura: ***You're surprised?***

Paul: ***I've never heard you say it before.***

Laura: *Well, I guess you save the best for last.*

Paul: *That's the best, Laura, that you hate yourself?*

Laura: *I don't know, Paul. It's something people realize about me after an hour.*

Paul: *I didn't know it after an hour or a year. It's not easy for me to hear you say that.*

Laura: ***Maybe you should try and find out why it's so hard for you. Maybe you should see someone.*** (In Treatment)

Laura seems to be experiencing some kind of glee at catching the psychoanalyst off-guard. Pointing out Paul's surprise is for her a way of exchanging roles and, for once, of assuming power within the interpersonal relationship. She goes as far as to suggest that Paul himself should see a psychoanalyst, and *You're surprised?* implies *Well, you shouldn't be*. The question in any case is interpreted as face-threatening by the addressee, who is reluctant to admit his surprise for professional reasons and tries to justify himself (*I've never heard you say it*).

## 5. Conclusion

The surprise lexicon is currently being investigated from both a semantic and a syntactic viewpoint (see Valetopoulos 2013). Novakova *et al.* (2012) have provided evidence that

correlations exist between syntactic patterns and semantic dimensions. We hope to have shown that a pragmatic analysis of verbal interaction allows establishing correlations between syntactic patterns and discourse strategies. Surprise lexemes do not always convey surprise but may be exploited pragmatically within complex argumentative strategies – hence confirming the need to distinguish between emotional communication and emotive communication. In the case of the adjective *surprised* used in first- and second-person utterances in the present tense, two strategies are at work: namely, expressing reproach in an indirect way and attempting to control conversation.

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