Recent work on the functional architecture of the left periphery of the sentence, focusing on the relative order of *wh*-phrases and left-dislocated constituents, has highlighted that *wh*-phrases in main exclamatives target a landing site which is not activated in main *wh*-interrogatives (cf. Benincà (1996), (2001)).

However, data from various northern Italian dialects (as well as from standard Italian) provide evidence that a lower projection with focus properties can be activated in exclamative contexts; this hypothesis is supported by the fact that bare *wh*-phrases, unlike complex ones, must follow left dislocated phrases even in exclamatives. Moreover, in the northern Italian dialects displaying subject clitic inversion in main interrogatives, the syntactic feature characterizing *wh*-exclamatives is (the absence of inversion and) the presence of the complementizer *che*. The overt realization of the complementizer is subject to variation both cross-linguistically and within the same dialect, as witnessed by the following data from Cremonese (Southern Lombard), where the presence of *che* seems to depend on the internal shape of the *wh*-phrase; in particular, we find a tripartition sorting out bare *wh*-phrases (which are incompatible with the complementizer), complex *wh*-phrases (which are compatible with the complementizer), and *wh*-phrases formed by *che* + adjective (which require the complementizer), as exemplified in (1a-c) respectively:

(1)a. *A chi l’àal dit!*
    To whom he told it!

(1)b. *Quanti studèent (ch’) i prooa l’ezàm stevòlta!*
    How many students try the exam this time!

(1)c. *Che spurch che l’ò catàat*
    How dirty I found it!

Furthermore, in *wh*-phrases where the head noun is modified by an adjective, the order of the two elements affects the presence/absence of the complementizer. It is tempting to view *che* as the lexical realization of (the head of) a focus-related projection which is activated in *wh*-exclamatives as intermediate landing site of the *wh*-phrase on its way to the final target; this double-step analysis has a bearing on - and will be discussed in relation to - Rizzi’s (2004) recent *criterial freezing* principle - according to which a phrase meeting a criterion is frozen in place.