

From 'Huh?' to 'Who?' The universal utterances that keep us talking

October 8 2015, by Nick Enfield



Conversations collected from many countries across the world. Credit: Nick Enfield, Author provided

There's more to our discovery that every language appears to have the word "[Huh?](#)", or at least something that sounds very similar, that saw us pick up one of this year's [Ig Nobel Prizes](#) that celebrate some of the more unusual research.

"Huh?" has the same effect in every culture of getting the other person to back up and repeat or clarify what they just said, but there are other common features that emerge from our study of spoken languages.

The prize-winning paper, first [published in the journal PLoS ONE](#) in 2013, was a careful comparison of words in a small sample of the world's languages. While our sample included diverse languages from five continents, it is a smaller sample than people usually want in a modern linguistic study.

Some 7,000 languages are spoken in the world today and many modern studies that compare grammatical structures insist on a sample of 100 or more languages. But those studies about the structure of sentences or phrases use data that can be found in books in the library.

The language of conversation

If your question is about a feature of language that only occurs in the messy reality of [conversation](#) then you won't find the answer in a grammar book.

To gather facts on how people fix problems in communication you have no choice but to go to the village (or equivalent) and collect recordings of everyday conversation, in all its messy glory.

In one group studying the ways in which people handle communication problems in conversation, we noticed that all of the very different languages we were working on – spoken in countries from Ecuador to Ghana to Laos to Indigenous Australia – had a word that sounded something like "Huh?", used when a person had not heard or understood what was just said.

We delved deeper into this question and set out to test whether our

impression was correct. Colleagues donated recordings of people saying the "Huh?" word in ten different languages and we systematically compared their phonetic features, including the quality of the vowel used and the type of intonation.

We found that the words were surprisingly similar across these otherwise very different languages. Our conclusion: one of the vanishingly rare universal words turns out to be a sign of confusion, poor hearing or misunderstanding.

Beyond 'Huh?'

While the "Huh?" study attracted a lot of media attention – and the Ig Nobel Prize – it was actually just a by-product of a [much larger study](#). The results of that larger study [were published](#), coincidentally, in the same week we received the Ig Nobel for the earlier paper.

In this larger study we also relied on large collections of video-recorded conversations that we collected ourselves during long-term field work in countries across the world.

Each researcher spent long periods, anywhere between months to years, collecting informal conversations in home and village settings, and painstakingly transcribing and translating what was said in those conversations.

With this body of data – 48 hours of running conversation in 12 [different languages](#) – the team of researchers was able to pinpoint the full range of strategies that people use for alerting others to problems in understanding what has been said or heard, and for getting them to fix or repair what was said in the conversation.

This is evidence for a language universal, a very rare thing. All languages

have the same basic system for asking someone to [back up and repair](#) what they just said. The system performs a function that all languages need, and very often: it is used, on average in all the languages, once every 84 seconds.

The core elements of the system are present in all languages, consisting of three ways to trigger a repair sequence: the "Huh?" type, "Who?" type and "She did?" type.

These types work in the same ways in all the languages tested.

- "Huh?" tends to elicit a more wordy attempt to repair the problem (by fully repeating what you just said)
- "Who?" and other question words tend to elicit a focused clarification such as a name
- "She did?" tends to elicit a short and simple confirmation.

We also found that there are universal principles governing the use of this system: when people ask others to back up and repair or clarify what they said, they are as specific and as economical as they can be. This shows evidence for a universal cooperative principle in conversation.

A common tongue

The findings suggest that the previous search for universals of [human language](#) has been looking in the wrong place: little research in comparative linguistics or cognitive science has been based on data from free-flowing conversation.

The usual focus has been on phrases and sentences, often devoid of context. The seemingly scrappy flow of conversation has sometimes been deemed either as irrelevant or too difficult to study.

Our work shows that these claims are both false. We hope that our work will draw attention to a change under way in the science of language. It is a shift from viewing language as a static system for representing logical relations to viewing it as a dynamic tool for managing social interaction.

While we have revelled in the fun side of winning an Ig Nobel, awarded for research that "makes people laugh and then think", we sincerely hope that people are encouraged not just to smirk at the findings but to think about them too.

The system for repair of [communication problems](#) is a system unique to human language. Nothing like it is found in animal communication systems. This, we think, is because the repair system cannot operate without three quintessentially human factors.

The first is that human language is a communication system that allows us to consciously communicate about the communicative system itself. The second is that humans have a uniquely high degree of social intelligence, which we use for monitoring others' intentions and understandings.

The third is that humans have unique cooperative and collaborative capacities, of a kind that make it possible for us to ask another person to back up and repeat or rephrase what they just said (and to assume that they will do it).

If there is a human [language](#) faculty, these are the kinds of things it is made of.

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