

# Ig Nobel Prize for research in linguistics that found evidence of universal trait in human conversation

17 September 2015

Professor Nick Enfield of the University of Sydney has won an Ig Nobel Prize for breakthrough research in linguistics that found evidence of a universal trait in human conversation.

The Ig Nobel Prizes are organised by the magazine *Annals of Improbable Research* and are awarded annually at Harvard University in honour of research achievements that "make people laugh, and then think".

The prizes were first established as a tongue-in-cheek alternative to the Nobels. But the awards, now in their 25th year, have gained their own prestige within the scientific community, with each individual 'Ig' presented to winners by a Nobel Laureate.

Professor Enfield and his co-authors Dr Mark Dingemanse and Dr Francisco Torreira of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in the Netherlands were recognised for their 2013 *PLOS ONE* paper revealing 'Huh' is a universal word.

In a major cross-linguistic study, they sampled 31 languages and found all have a word with a near-identical sound and function as 'Huh' in the English language; evidence, they proposed, that 'Huh' is an indispensable tool in human communication.

"We are delighted that our research has been recognised with an Ig Nobel Prize, because it lives up to the awards' mission to celebrate research that first makes people laugh and then think. It's fitting because misunderstandings themselves can so often do this," said Professor Enfield, Chair of the University of Sydney's Department of Linguistics.

**The 90-second marker for mutual understanding**

Professor Enfield and Dr Dingemanse have followed up their Ig Nobel-winning research with the publication of a new *PLOS ONE* paper, which suggests humans 'fix' misunderstandings in conversation on average every 90 seconds - regardless of the language being spoken.

"The findings give insight into what is special about language in our species," said Professor Enfield.

Building on their 2013 'Huh' study, an international team of linguists scoured over 48 hours of conversation in 12 different languages spoken across five continents and found in each language the speakers share the same basic system for 'fixing' misunderstanding.

Efforts to fix misunderstanding in conversation can be as simple as the word 'Huh' or a question such as 'Who?' And on average, no five minutes of conversation go by in any language without someone attempting to fix a misunderstanding.

The researchers studied the Aboriginal language of Murrinh-Patha in Northern Australia, Mandarin Chinese in Taiwan, Argentine Sign Language, and Siwu in Ghana, among others. The findings suggest that the universal foundations of language are in human social cognition.

"We humans excel at monitoring each others' states of understanding, and we are masters of the kind of cooperation and collaboration that mutual understanding requires," said Professor Enfield.

Language scientists have historically laboured over the study of conversation, but the research of Professor Enfield and his colleagues provide further evidence for a long sought-after finding: a universal principle in how humans communicate in conversation.

"Our findings could help computers to communicate in more 'human' ways, for instance when they don't understand voice commands. They also have applications in [language](#) teaching and cross-cultural communication: knowing how and when to use these tools can help people to secure mutual understanding quickly and effectively," said lead author of the *PLOS ONE* paper, Dr Dingemanse.

The research is part of a five-year European Research Council (ERC) project led by Professor Enfield.

### Three talking points on human communication

- 'Huh' and its variants appear in 31 languages
- People stop for clarification in conversation once every 90 seconds
- People share the burden of fixing misunderstanding in [conversation](#).

**More information:** Info about the study (published in *PLOS ONE* in 2013) which has just won an Ig Nobel Prize: [huh.ideophone.org](http://huh.ideophone.org)

Info about the new *PLOS ONE* study published on 16 September 2015:  
[repair.ideophone.org/frequently-asked-questions/](http://repair.ideophone.org/frequently-asked-questions/)

Provided by University of Sydney

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