

"Huh?" deserves some respect, researchers say, as a universal word

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff

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LOS ANGELES — Humans speak many languages, but we may express our confusion in similar ways. A new study examined languages from around the world and discovered what could be a global word: “Huh?”

Researchers traveled to cities and remote villages on five continents. They visited native speakers of 10 very different languages. Their nearly 200 recordings of casual conversations revealed that there are versions of “Huh?” in every language they studied. They even sound remarkably similar.

While it may seem like a throwaway word, “Huh?” is the glue that holds a broken conversation together, the team reported. Their findings were published Friday in the journal PLOS ONE. The fact that it appears over and over reveals a remarkable case of languages developing independently, but in a similar way, they added.

“Huh?” is not a well-respected word in English. It’s seen as a filler word, little more than what’s called a conversational grunt, like “mm-hmm.” But it plays a vital role in conversations, said Herbert Clark, a psychologist at Stanford University who studies language.

"Huh?" Universal, Yet Uncharted

When a person misses a bit of information, communication can break down. There needs to be a quick way to fix it, he said.

“You can’t have a conversation without the ability to make repairs,” said Clark, who wasn’t involved in the study.

For this study, scientists from the Netherlands set out to show that “Huh?” had earned the place of a full-fledged word, though an admittedly odd one. They also wanted to see whether other languages had a similar word with a similar purpose.

The problem is that “Huh?” often seems like such an unimportant feature of language. So much so, that it’s not well documented, said Nick Enfield. He studies how language influences people's lives and worked on the study.

So, the scientists headed to remote villages in Ecuador, Laos, Ghana and Australia and spent weeks getting acquainted with the locals. First, they felt they had to gain people’s trust. Then, they could record casual conversations. They hoped to catch a few instances of “Huh?” in its natural environment.

“The kind of conversations we collected were just the kind of conversations you and I would have at the breakfast table,” Enfield said.

"Huh?" Around The Globe

The scientists also visited family homes in Italy, Russia and Taiwan as well as laboratories in Spain and the Netherlands. The languages studied included Cha’palaa in Ecuador, Siwu in Ghana and Murriny Patha in Australia. They also studied Dutch, Icelandic, Italian, Lao, Mandarin Chinese, Russian and Spanish. English wasn’t included in the study.

Across these languages, they found a remarkable similarity among the “Huhs?” All the words had a single syllable, and they were typically limited to a low-front vowel, something similar to “ah” or “eh.”

Sometimes this simple word started with a consonant, as does the English “Huh?” or the Dutch “Heh?” Across all 10 languages, there were at least 64 simple consonants to choose from. But, the word always started with an H or a glottal stop — the sound in the middle of the English “uh-oh.”

Every version of “Huh?” was clearly a word because it passed two key tests, the scientists said: Each “Huh?” had to be learned by speakers and follow the rules of its language. For example, English speakers ask questions with rising tones, so when they say “Huh?” their voices rise. Icelandic speakers’ voices fall when they ask a question. Sure enough, the tone goes down as they ask, “Ha?” To an English speaker, this tone would sound like a statement of fact: “Huh.”

Same Meaning, Different Words

“It’s amazing,” said Tanya Stivers, a sociologist at the University of California, Los Angeles who was not involved in the study. “You do see that it’s slightly different ... and that it seems to adapt to the specific language. I think that’s fascinating.”

After all, Stivers pointed out, words with the same meaning sound very different in different languages. Why wouldn’t “Huh?” also sound completely different across unrelated languages?

The Dutch researchers think it’s because the word developed in a particular environment for a particular need. The point is to quickly fix a broken conversation by getting the speaker to fill in the listener’s blank.

A low-front vowel in the “ah” or “eh” families involves little effort. This allows speakers to very quickly signal that they missed a bit of information, and request it again. High vowel sounds such as “ee” or a lip-rounder such as “oo” require more effort. That’s probably why they weren’t chosen for such a common word.

Just as sharks and dolphins developed similar movements in the water even though they’re very different, all languages have developed a “Huh?” Researchers said it’s because it’s so useful for solving a particular problem.

“‘Huh?’ has almost certainly been independently invented many, many, times,” said Mark Pagel. He teaches about how language develops at the University of Reading in England and was not involved in the PLOS ONE study. “And that is why it appears universal.”

3 Point Written Response on: _____

Quiz Questions

1. Why did the Dutch scientists travel to different continents for their study?

- (A) They wanted to see if they could gain the trust of people from many different cultures.
- (B) They wanted to study unrelated languages to see if there was a similarity between them.
- (C) They wanted to learn how to speak languages spoken by people from different continents.
- (D) They wanted to see how the languages of different countries influence people's lives.

2. Why is it amazing that all the languages studied use some version of "Huh?"

- (A) It shows that these languages all have a similar quality even though they are very different.
- (B) It shows that people all over the globe have casual conversations every day.
- (C) It proves that these vastly different cultures share the same belief that the word "Huh?" is not respected.
- (D) It proves that people can now understand multiple languages because they all use a similar word.

3. What does the word "remote" mean as used in the following sentence? Researches traveled to cities and remote villages on five continents.

- (A) local
- (B) large
- (C) faraway
- (D) bustling

4. Select the answer choice that has the same meaning of the word "feature" as it is used in this sentence from the article. The problem is that "Huh?" often seems like such an unimportant feature of language.

- (A) misunderstanding
- (B) characteristic
- (C) sound
- (D) word