

Form and function of a possibly universal interjection for initiating repair

oral

Everyday language use displays rules and regularities well within the purview of typology. We illustrate this point with reference to other-initiated repair, an elaborate machinery for dealing with problems in speaking, hearing and understanding found in every natural language so far investigated (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977; Clark 1996). One cross-linguistically widespread strategy for initiating repair on a previous turn is the use of an interjection like “*huh?*”. Consider the following example from English. The interjection in line 2 initiates repair on the previous turn and elicits a repetition in the following turn.

1 G It’s not too bad,
2 → E Huh?
3 G ‘S not too bad,

Even though repair mechanisms are fundamental to communication everywhere, research so far has focused on English and has not been comparative in scope. We report on a detailed investigation of the interjection strategy as it occurs in video corpora of informal everyday conversation in a diverse sample of 12 languages. Keeping sequential context constant, we examine over 200 tokens of the interjection for onset, pitch, and vowel quality. We combine phonetic measurements with a rating procedure to arrive at replicable judgements of the phonetic qualities of every single token. We find that the phonetic form of the interjection is strikingly similar across languages: a monosyllable with at most some glottal constriction at onset [h, ʔ], featuring an open non-high non-back vowel [a, æ, ε, ɜ, ə], often nasalized, and often produced with rising intonation. Typical tokens are [hɛʔ] in Dutch, [ãʔ] in Chintang (Kiranti, Nepal), [ãʔ] in Siwu (Kwa, Ghana), [aʋ] in Cha’palaa (Barbacoan, Ecuador), and [ãʔ] in Lao (Tai, Laos).

We investigate several questions raised by the strong formal and functional similarities of this interjection across languages. Are there reasons to consider this a word at all or is it simply a pre-lexical grunt? Do all languages aim for the same generic form or do we find language-specific targets? We consider the design of the interjection from the perspective of the linguistic systems it interacts with and the interactional environment in which it is found, and conclude that both are key to its form and meaning. Traditionally, the two main reasons for cross-linguistic similarities have been thought to be shared inheritance or contact. In this study we propose another factor: common interactional environments and their potential to exert selective pressure towards convergent evolution. This factor is likely of far wider relevance in cross-linguistic typology than realised.

Clark, Herbert H. 1996. *Using Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schegloff, Emanuel A., Gail Jefferson, and Harvey Sacks. 1977. “The Preference for Self-Correction in the Organization of Repair in Conversation.” *Language* 53 (2): 361–382.