"Huh?"

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Chomsky

A presentation based on the paper

Is "Huh?" a Universal Word? Conversational Infrastructure and the Convergent Evolution of Linguistic Items

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Is 'huh?' a universal word?

" When speakers initiate repair on the talk of co-participants in conversation, they may use repair initiation forms which locate the specific source of trouble (the repairable) in the prior turn; alternatively, they may select forms which treat the whole of the prior turn as in some way problematic.[1]

"

[1]. "Open" class repair initiators in response to sequential sources of trouble in conversation (Drew P, 1997)

Other-Initiated Repair

In conversation, the listener frequently needs to make it clear that they have not fully caught what the speaker said. This need is fulfilled by a **"repair word"**.

Various words fulfil this function in various languages - question words ("what?"), polite phrases ("pardon?") or interjections ("huh?" / "eh?").

Hereafter, 'huh?' is used as the generic term for a certain class of OIR-interjections, and we shall more clearly define the features of this class moving forward.

Required to Prove

(Yay! Formalism!)

- Claim 1: "huh?" is universal

- Claim 2: "huh?" is a word

Claim 1

"Huh?" is universal

Small variation in structure

The basic claim is that all languages have similar OIR interjections.

- They are generally not longer than a syllable
- The syllable consists only of a vowel with an *optional* glottal onset consonant. The affinity between glottality and nasality is well known.[2]

[2]. Rhinoglottophilia: the mysterious connection between nasality and glottality. Matisoff JA (1975)

Similarity in vowels and consonants

The limitation in variation exists not only in terms of structure of the syllable but also in terms of the vowels and consonants it consists of:
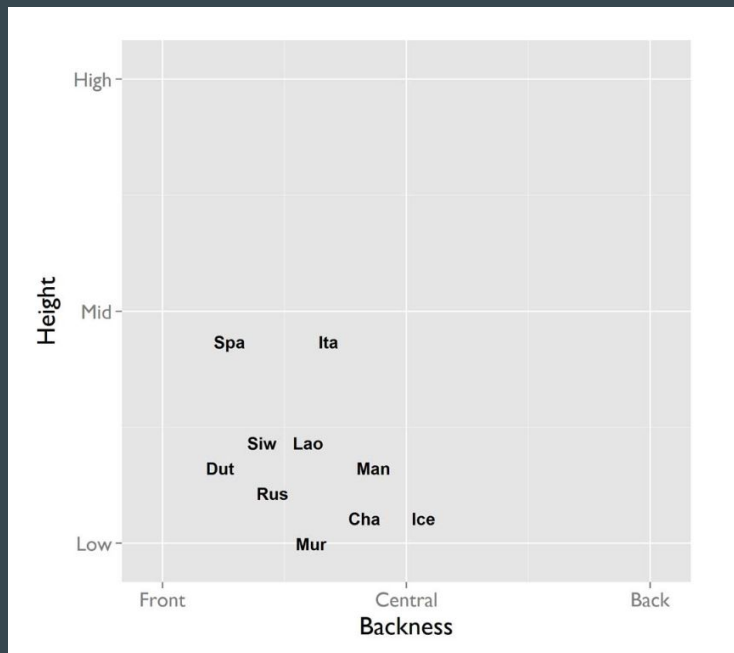
- On average, languages have about 6 vowel phonemes[3]. They are spread across the space defined by positions of the tongue against lip rounding.
- OIR interjection tokens are found mostly in the lower left of the vowel table and the lips are unrounded.

[3] Vowel Quality Inventories, The World Atlas of Language Structures Online (Maddieson I, 2011)

Similarity in place of articulation

For the 10 languages in the sample, interjectory vowel targets a small portion of the possible range for the place of articulation, specifically, around the **near-low near-front unrounded vowel.**

The language specific targets appear to be drawn to existing phenome targets, for eg: /e/ for Spanish, and /a/ Cha'palaa.

Average positions of the interjections in vowel space (by language)

Intonation and phonological integration

The intonation contour for the vowel has a positive correlation with the intonation contour for the interrogative prosody within the language.

What that means is that 'huh?' follows the same intonation contour as would be expected of a question within that language.

Interestingly, there is also a tonal language, Mandarin in the sample, and it does have an identifiable questioning intonation, though not as simple as "rising" or "falling"[6].

[6] Mechanisms of Question Intonation in Mandarin (Yuan J, 2004)

Claim 2

"Huh?" is a word

What is a word anyway?

"

A 'word' was considered to be a sound having
1. a clear meaning
2. the ability to participate in syntactic constructions, and
3. a phonotactically normal pronunciation. [4]

"

This definition, however, does *not* qualify "huh?" as a word.

[4]. Non-Lexical Conversational Sounds in American English (Ward N, 2006)

We find that it is inadequate to treat the "is it a word?" question as a binary decision; instead, we consider a spectrum of "wordness" (is that a word? XD).

> " Perhaps there is a continuum from non-linguistic vocalisations like sneezing and crying to prototypical conventional lexical items... "

The paper under consideration makes use of the following definition:

> " ....a conventional lexical sign which must be learnt "

which excludes sounds like laughter and crying, but includes interjections like "huh?".

Two main characteristics of "huh?" push it to the "standard word" side of the spectrum, in the author's and our view:

- **Integration**
  - "…shows some degree of calibration to local linguistic systems"
  - "…from segmental and prosodic phonology to conversational structure."
  - "part of a larger paradigm of expressions for the other-initiation of repair"

- **Conventionalisation**
  - "Its acquisition follows a normal trajectory…"
  - "…the precise form of this interjection has to be learnt…"
  - "…intuitions are not necessarily a reliable guide in this process."

Huh? How did this happen?

The existence of a word so universal as 'huh?' can be explained by the hypothesis that it is the product of **convergent cultural evolution**.

'Huh?' has the following features which make it fit for its purpose:
- Monosyllabic and short
- Glottal and requiring minimal stress of the articulators

For standard turn-taking in conversation, a tight conversation requires the gap between turns to be on average 200-300 ms[5].

'Huh?' is "quickly deployable, from intent to articulation", and thus a "tight fit of form and function found in language after language".

[5] Universals and cultural variation in turn-taking in conversation (Stivers T et al, 2009)

Conclusion

The article has in essence accomplished the following:

- OIR interjection tokens have enough attributes of a word, to say that "huh?" is a word.
- The variation in OIR interjection tokens across languages is small enough to consider them to be the same word
- A hypothesis has been presented as to why it is this way.

Appendix

References for respective citations:

1. "Open" class repair initiators in response to sequential sources of trouble in conversation (Drew P, 1997)

2. Rhinoglottophilia: the mysterious connection between nasality and glottality. (Matisoff JA, 1975)

3. Vowel Quality Inventories, The World Atlas of Language Structures Online (Maddieson I, 2011)

4. Non-Lexical Conversational Sounds in American English (Ward N, 2006)

5. Universals and cultural variation in turn-taking in conversation (Stivers T et al, 2009)

6. Mechanisms of Question Intonation in Mandarin (Yuan J, 2004)

All quotes are sourced from the main paper itself, unless cited to a separate paper clearly.