Verbal tagging – eh

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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

WHILE some young people play tag in the playground, others now tag buildings and are forced to wear pink vests if they are identified. But the tags I discuss today are linguistic rather than physical or visual phenomena.

English tag questions present real problems for language learners. Native speakers acquire naturally the rules that second language learners must laboriously learn in order to formulate the correct tags at the end of the each of the following sentences:

She arrived early didn't she?
Tom can't sing can he?
It was a lovely day wasn't it?
You won't be late will you?

The rules are complicated. There are word order rules: the tag reverses the verb and subject, eg can he? There are tense matching rules since the verb in the tag must match the tense of the verb at the beginning of the sentence, eg it was ... wasn't it vs it is ... isn't it.

The subject must also match, so the pronoun in the tag must be the same as the subject at the beginning of the sentence, and when a noun or name is involved the pronoun must also match in gender.

There are more rules involving the polarity (negative or not) of the tag, and intonation rules (falling or rising), but that's enough to illustrate the point that learning how to include a tag question in English is a complicated matter if you didn't learn the language at an early age.

Many other languages have much simpler ways of formulating tags. In German, for instance, the formal standard tag is "nicht wahr", and it doesn't change its shape no matter what you add it to. In colloquial German, young people use "gel" or "oder", depending on whether they are northern or southern Germans.

French people use "n'est-ce pas" as a tag regardless of what they add it to. In Korean, it is "jo", and in Maori "ne". So English learners are really unlucky in this respect.

But New Zealand English offers an alternative to all those complicated constructions. The informal tag "eh" can be added without changing its form: "that was cool eh", "she can speak Maori eh". It is much shorter too. It is not surprising that clever foreign learners identify eh as a useful strategy for avoiding those complex grammatical rules.

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But why do native speakers use eh? They know the complicated rules without having to stop and think. One reason is that eh is a way of expressing friendliness, and it is also a very distinctively New Zealand tag. It makes an interaction feel more sociable and relaxed.

No wonder then that it has spread so fast through New Zealand English. An analysis of eh by Miriam Meyerhoff in the data from a social dialect survey undertaken in the early 1990s by Victoria sociolinguists told us that eh was most frequent in the casual speech of young Maori men and women, as well as young Pakeha women. Older Pakeha people, in particular, did not use it much at all.

But in the last 20 years eh has spread rapidly, and now it can be heard in the speech of middle-aged and older people, and even in relatively formal meetings in the material we have recently recorded in some Wellington workplaces.

It also seems clear that Maori people use eh more often than Pakeha, and this reflects the fact that eh was a feature of the English of Maori people and those who had lots of Maori friends long before it was adopted more widely by other New Zealanders. In fact it seems very plausible that the source of the invaluable eh is the Maori tag ne.

The trail of its spread seems to be from young Maori men to young Pakeha women and then outwards to non-Maori society more generally, and from informal contexts to more formal meetings — a very familiar pathway for a language change, though one more commonly found for a sound change than for a tag like eh.

And interestingly it is young women who are often the conduits of language change, as attested in the research of language and gender researchers, many of whom are attending the International Gender and Language Association Conference in Wellington this week. But that is the topic of another column.

■ *For more information on the International Gender and Language Association Conference, go to victoria.ac.nz/igala5*

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