

Eh is for Aotearoa, innit?

IN AN earlier column (*Verbal tagging* — *eh*, July 2) Janet Holmes commented on how “eh” is used by many speakers of New Zealand English instead of a range of tag questions, such as “didn’t she?”, “can he?”, “wasn’t it?”, “will you?”, etc.

She pointed out that using these tag questions correctly is complicated and, while this is second nature to most native speakers of English, tag questions can be a stumbling block to non-native learners.

Children learning English as their first language also struggle with tag questions, making mistakes with the pronoun (“They like Robert, don’t he?”), and especially with the presence or absence of a negative in the tag (“He isn’t feeling sleepy any more, isn’t he?”). Also, like non-native speakers, they often avoid this kind of tag altogether, instead saying something like “Okay?”, “huh?” or “eh?”

When a language has one tag or a small range of tags that don’t change according to the grammar of the main sentence, it is said to have an invariant tag. Using an invariant tag like “eh” does seem to make life simpler. But simplicity

“men” (which is also used as an exclamation, similarly to “Man!” in other English varieties).

A tag form increasingly heard in Britain is “innit”, usually with a glottal stop at the end. At one stage “innit” would have been regarded as a contracted form of “isn’t it?” and found exclusively where the subject of the main statement is third person neuter singular, ie “it” with the verb “is”, as in “It’s raining hard, innit?”

But “innit” is spreading, much like “eh” in New Zealand English and other invariant tags in other varieties, so that you are likely to hear “We need to fix this, innit?” During a prolonged stay in south-east London five years ago, I was struck by how widely “innit” was used, particularly among young people. One of the things that made it stand out was the apparent grammatical disagreement, as in the last example. But this was because I continued to treat “innit” as “isn’t it”, rather than as “eh”.

A study of adolescent language in inner London in the early 1990s found that “innit”, like “eh” in New Zealand, also marked a speaker’s identity. Its use depended to an



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is not the only explanation for its use in adult native speech, as Janet pointed out. In New Zealand, using “eh” often conveys something about the speaker’s identity, or that of the group they belong to.

In addition, the type of invariant tag you use in English can say something about the part of the world you come from. Indian English has “no?” or “na?”. In Singapore English, both “is it?” and “isn’t it?” are commonly found (“My mum gone, is it?”), as well as “right?” The form of the invariant tag is in some cases linked to other languages with which English comes into contact. The tags in Sri Lankan English, for instance, are direct translations from Sinhala and Tamil — “no”, “isn’t it” and

extent on the speaker’s sex, ethnicity and social class, as well as on where they lived. However, the study also suggested that it was becoming more widely accepted as an invariant tag among the young. It is now so widespread that, according to a *Daily Mail* report last year, the Tesco supermarket chain produced a guide to youth slang for its staff that included the following entry: “Innit? = Isn’t it? Is it? You know? Oh, really?”

I have also encountered a “yoof-speak” guide to Shakespeare that renames one of the bard’s plays as *All’s Sweet that Ends Sweet, Innit*.

If a Google search on the nz domain is anything to go by, “innit” with this usage has not yet caught on in New Zealand, perhaps because we already have “eh”. Most “innit” hits were references to the movie *Ali G, Innit*. But language continues to change, and youth culture is one influence on the direction it takes. We’ll have to see what happens in NewZild, innit?

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