

# A comparative analysis of an invariant tag in six varieties of English, *eh?*

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# 1. Theoretical context of an invariant tag

eg. (1) *He's pretty stupid, eh?*

- **General categorisation**
  - ⇒ *Eh* as a interjection, discourse marker, invariant tag (cf. *isn't it*) (Anderson 2001, Biber et al. 1999, Columbus 2009)
- **Social implications**
  - ⇒ Politeness marker (addressee-oriented device)
  - ⇒ To signal tentative approach on part of speaker
  - ⇒ Ethnic tag/identity marker (cf. Canada, NZ)
  - ⇒ *Eh* is frequently used by lower-class speakers (Stubbe and Holmes 1995)
- **Pragmatic functions → Focus**
  - ⇒ Adaptation of previous studies (Avis 1972, Columbus 2009, 2010a, 2010b, Gibson 1977, Gold 2005, Johnson 1976)

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	<b>Functions of <i>eh</i></b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<b>Pragmatic functions of <i>eh</i></b>	1. Emphatic	to reinforce statement
	2. Confirmation	to confirm fact, potentially politeness marker
	3. Opinion	to ask for opinion or agreement of hearer (canonical tag question)
	4. Fixed expressions	eg. <i>see you, eh?</i>
	5. Asking for repetition	to ask for repetition in the sense of 'what?' or 'pardon?'
	6. Narrative	to hold the hearer's attention
	7. Accusation	to mitigate force of insult or accusation
	8. Unclear	
<b>Social functions</b>	9. Politeness marker	second function to pragmatic function of tag
	10. In-group identity marker	can only be measured within the cultural context

Table 1. Types of *eh* according to pragmatic and social functions.

## 2. Methodological concerns

- **focus** on spoken data (language of immediacy, Koch & Oesterreicher 1985)
- **size of data:** first 100 instances elicited and analysed whenever possible
- **six varieties:** ScE, CIE, CanE, NZE, FE, MalTE
- **Corpora:**
  - NZE, CanE, Fiji English: spoken component of ICE-New Zealand, ICE-Canada, ICE-Fiji
    - ⇒ ICE-Fiji: 10 transcripts analysed manually
  - ScE: SCOTS = Scottish Corpus of Text and Speech ([www.scottishcorpus.ac.uk](http://www.scottishcorpus.ac.uk))
  - Channel Island English (CIE): forum 'This is Guernsey' ([www.thisisguernsey.co.uk](http://www.thisisguernsey.co.uk))
  - MalTE: secondary information so far

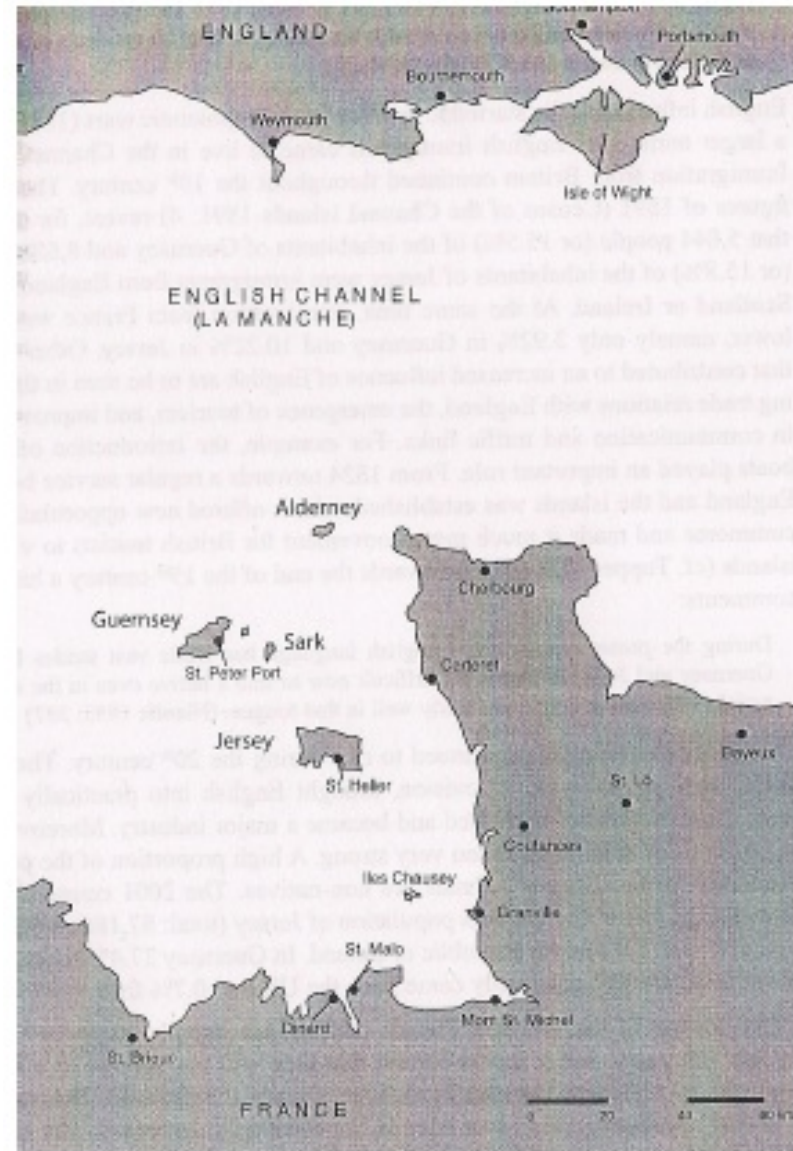
## 3. Six varieties – 2 examples

- Scottish English
- Channel Island English
- Canadian English
- New Zealand English
- Fiji English
- Maltese English

## Channel Island English

### Some historical facts:

- main spoken language = Norman French until 19<sup>th</sup> century
- since 1204 under British rule, but separate administration, etc.
- since 19<sup>th</sup> century increasing contact with British culture/language through better transportation system, soldiers stationed, immigrants to the Islands
- **English** ousted **Norman French** as main language of the Islands





# Channel Island English

Type of <i>eh</i>	number of instances in 100 first samples
1. Emphatic	9
2. Confirmation	5
3. Opinion	9
4. Fixed expression	1
5. Asking for repetition	0
6. Narrative	1
7. Accusation	0
8. Unclear	0
9. Politeness marker	2
10. In-group identity marker	n/a
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>25</b>

Table 2. Types of *eh* found in CIE.

# Channel Island English

## Emphatic:

(2) *Where have those days gone eh?*

(Heather, posted on Wednesday, June 26, 2002)

## Opinion:

(3) *They were made though in those days eh?*

(Bev, posted on Sun, Nov 24, 2002)

## Narrative:

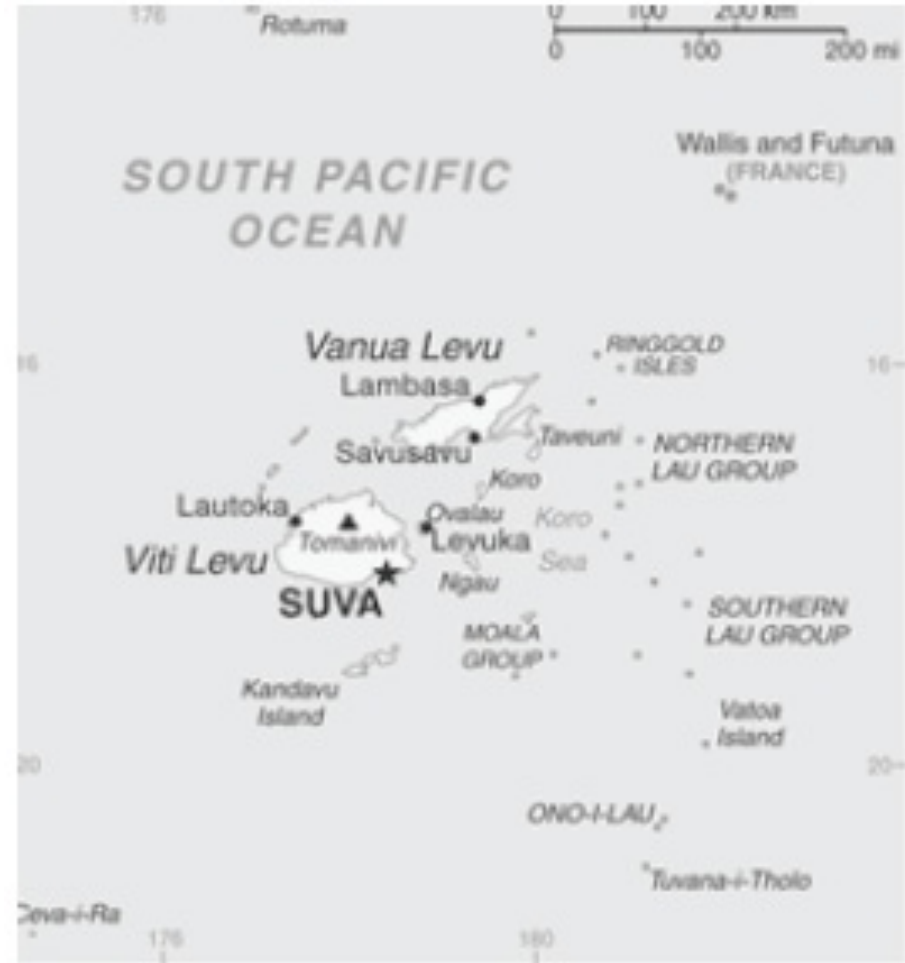
(4) *That was a long time ago eh when we had  
5digit telephone numbers eh, Eric thanks for  
trying...*

(nigellenoury, posted on Thursday, Feb 03, 2011)

# Fiji English

## Some historical facts:

- first European immigrants in 19<sup>th</sup> century (missionaries, sailors, etc.)
- British colony in late 19<sup>th</sup> century
- indentured labourers from India arrived for work on plantation
- Hindi and Fijian as principal mediums of communication
- English needed as *lingua franca* for socially and politically diverse Indians and Fijians



# Fiji English

Type of <i>eh</i>	number of instances in ten transcripts
1. Emphatic	3
2. Confirmation	4
3. Opinion	27
4. Fixed expression	0
5. Asking for repetition	2
6. Narrative	28
7. Accusation	0
8. Unclear	1
9. Politeness marker	1
10. In-group identity marker	n/a
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>74</b>

Table 3. Types of *eh* in Fiji English.

## Fiji English

(5) ...*like, I want to become a diplomat **eh?** # you know work to serve humanity **eh?** # like not only in the Pacific not only in Fiji but to the Pacific and you know, outside the region **eh?** over to other parts of the world **eh?** # like I want to serve in China or I want to serve in Brussels, you know in the embassies, where I don't serve, go and serve Fiji **eh?** # yes, go and serve my country over there, because times are different you know, the mentality of uh the ambassadors in the past is different from the mentality here, uh compared to the present **eh?***

(ICE-Fiji:S1A-006)

## 4. Preliminary results

Type of <i>eh</i>	ScE	CIE	CanE	NZE	FE	MaltE
1. Emphatic	X	X	X	X	X	
2. Confirmation		X	X	X	X	
3. Opinion	X	X	X	X	X	X
4. Fixed expression		X	X			
5. Asking for repetition	X	X	X	X	X	
6. Narrative		X	X	X	X	
7. Accusation			X			
8. Unclear	X		X		X	
9. Politeness marker	X	X	X	X	X	
10. In-group identity marker		X	X	X		X

Table 4. Types of *eh* in six varieties of English.

## 5. Explanations for spread

- Language contact scenarios between English and a substratum languages

**or/and**

- founder diffusion?

## Contact scenarios – calqued or borrowed element?

**Scotland:** Scottish English – Scots  $\Rightarrow$  *eh* from Broad Scots

**Channel Islands:** CIE – Norman French  $\Rightarrow$  *eh* frequently used in Norman French

**Canada:** CanE – French  $\Rightarrow$  similar pragmatic functional distribution as French *hein*

**New Zealand:** NZE– Maori  $\Rightarrow$  *eh* is calqued on Maori particle *ne*

**Fiji:** FE – Fijian/Hindi  $\Rightarrow$  *eh* is calqued on Fijian particle *ne*

**Malta:** MalE – Maltese/Italian  $\Rightarrow$  *eh* is borrowing from either Maltese or Italian



# Founder diffusion? - Evidence from *the Oxford English Dictionary* (OED):

## *eh*, int.

**Pronunciation:** /e:/ /eɪ/

**Etymology:** repr. an exclamation of instinctive origin; Middle English had *ey*; the mod. spelling may be after French *eh*, though it might have suggested itself independently.

### 1. An ejaculation of sorrow

1567 *Triall of Treasure* sig. Ciii<sup>v</sup>, Ye they haue vsed me with to much vilanie.

### 2. An interjectional interrogative particle; often inviting assent to the sentiment expressed

1773 O. Goldsmith *She stoops to Conquer* ii. 32 Wasn't it lucky? eh!

1816 'Quiz' *Grand Master* vi. 132 What have I brought you here for—eh?

## 6. Conclusion

- *eh* is found in more varieties than has been hitherto anticipated
- *eh* shows great variation in usage
- functions that have been claimed by some varieties to be exclusively typical of their own speech, eg. CanE (Avis 1972, Gold 2008), have also been found in other varieties
- language contact scenarios and founder diffusion can partly explain the use
- frequent users of *eh*: lower-social classes (substratum speakers in eg. NZE, CanE)
- in-group identity marker ⇒ **Vernacular feature**

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**Thank you for your attention!**

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## Historical background

	AY	AH	EH
spelling variations	<i>ey, ei, eigh, aye, ay</i>	<i>ay! eh!</i>	<i>ey</i> (ME)
<b>First attestations in OED</b>			
1250-1299		expression of entreaty, appeal, to excite attention	
1300-1349	<i>Ah! O!</i> exclamation of surprise, invocation (northern)		
1350-1399			
1400-1449			
1450-1499			
1500-1549		expression of sorrow, regret expression of dislike, aversion	
1550-1599	ejaculation of regret: <i>ay me!</i> <i>Ah me!</i>	Ejaculation of regret: <i>ah me!</i> , northern <i>eh me!</i>	ejaculation of sorrow
1600-1649			
1650-1699			
1700-1749			
1750-1799			
1800-1849	ejaculation of surprise, wonder, admiration		
1850-1899		used interrogatively as request to repeat what has been said ('pardon?')	
Modern usage		expression of opposition, objection	

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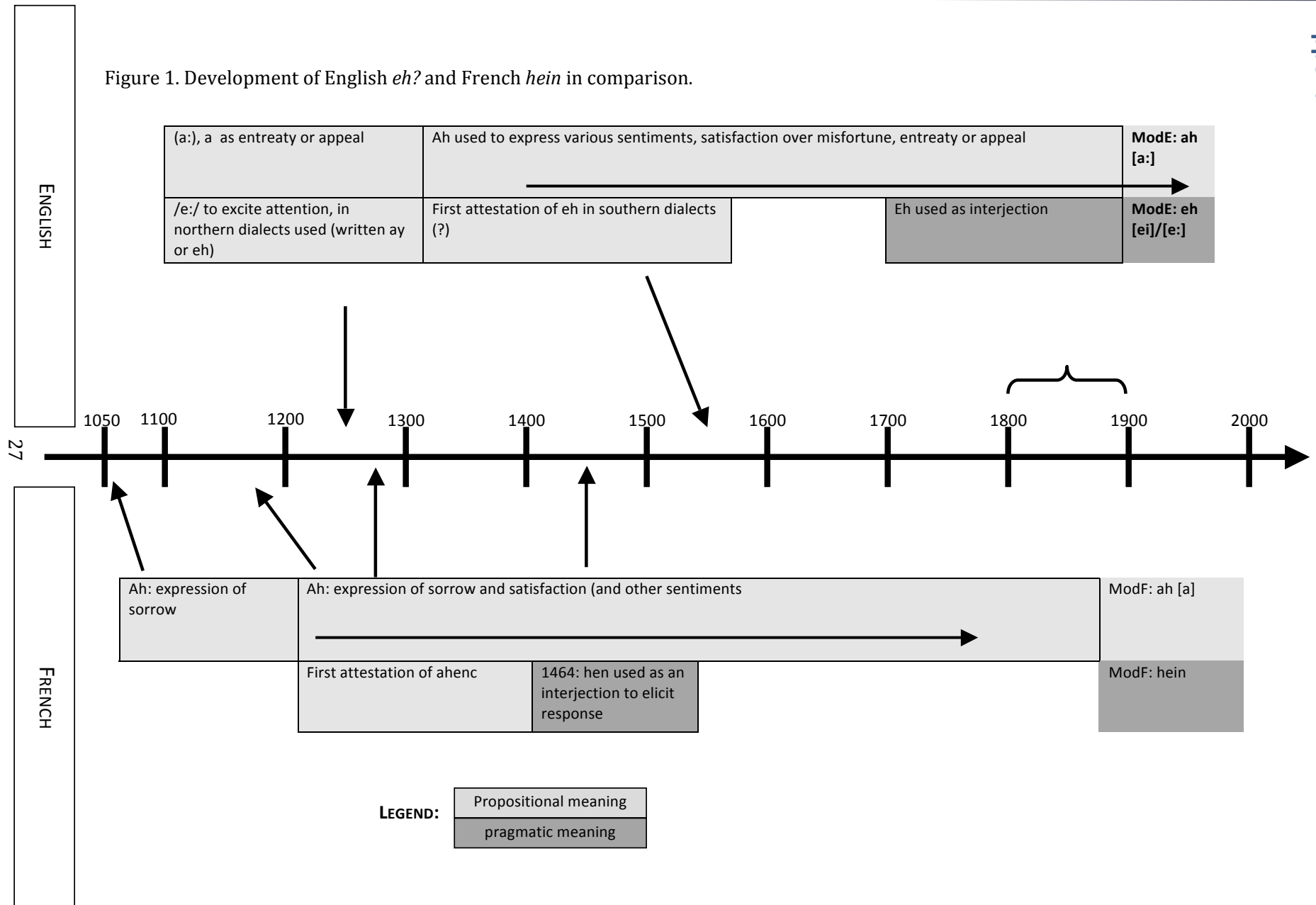
	1650-1699	1700-1749	1750-1799	1800-1849	1850-1899	1900-1949	1950-1999
ha?	2	6	1	1	0	0	0
ha!	13	20	2	7	3	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
eh?	0	0	0	13	14	3	1
eh!	0	0	2	4	1	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>



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Figure 1. Development of English *eh?* and French *hein* in comparison.



## Historical background – possible sources of origin

- Language contact with Norman French + internal motivations for language change in Middle English → emergence of pragmatic marker *eh*
- phonological resemblance between Norman French *hein* and English *eh* → transfer of pragmatic meaning from French to English
- functional proximity between *ha* and *eh* and its other two interjections *ah!* and *ay!*
- *eh* is first used to elicit response from hearer
- spread of *eh* in speech of immigrants to new colonies where it is a feature of vernacular speech
- language contact scenarios in colonial Englishes (substratum languages often have similar pragmatic marker)

# Maltese English

## Some historical facts:

- Maltese and Italian spoken on Island when it came under British dominion in 1800
- Italian and English both as languages of administration
- BUT: spread of English in military and administrative domain + British immigrants  
 → English > Italian
- attack of Italian military led to replacement of Italian as official language by Maltese in 1934
- Independence in 1969: English and Maltese = official languages
- Today: English = high prestige, while Maltese is associated with solidarity and slowly spreading to other domains



*Eh* is regarded as a **Maltese word** used in informal conversations and less likely in written Maltese English (Krug and Rosen forthcoming)

eg. (6) *You had an appointment, eh?* (Mazzon 1993: 201)

(7) *I've got no chance, eh?* (Krug and Rosen forthcoming)

→ *EH* is used to elicit response from the addressee (OPINION) and also to signal solidarity as a Maltese word (IN-GROUP) (Mazzon 1993:201)

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