

CANADIAN *EH?*: A SURVEY OF CONTEMPORARY USE

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1. Introduction: Previous Research on the Use of *Eh*

Although *eh* is widely considered to be a marker of Canadian speech, there has been little research done into its use or meaning and none in the last 25 years. During the 1970's there was a brief burst of interest in *eh*. The 1972 Survey of Canadian English included the following two questions regarding *eh*:

- (1) Do you use *eh* in, e.g., *So that's what he thinks, eh?*
- (2) Do you use *eh* for *What did you say?*

That same year Avis wrote an article entitled 'So *eh?* is Canadian, eh?' in which he argued against *eh* being a Canadianism, citing examples of *eh* from English writings around the world. However, he undermined his own argument, in that he could find only Canadian examples of two types of *eh*: the narrative *eh* illustrated in (3), and *eh* used as a reinforcement of an exclamation in (4):

- (3) "He's holding on to a firehose, eh? The thing is jumping all over the place, eh, and he can hardly hold onto it eh? Well, he finally loses control of it, eh, and the water knocks down half a dozen bystanders." (Avis: 103)
- (4) "How about that, eh?" (Avis: 99)

Love's 1973 B.A. thesis, from Edmonton, included a survey of the use of *eh* with declaratives, imperatives, exclamations, wh- and yes-no questions, based on Avis' examples. Gibson's 1977 PhD thesis, from Vancouver, proposed an eight-fold categorization of *eh* based on Avis' work that was then used in two subsequent surveys: the Survey of Vancouver English (1977, 1980) and the Ottawa Survey of Canadian English (1980).

Table 1: Survey Questions: Survey of Vancouver English, Ottawa Survey

Type of Eh	Sample Sentence
1. Reversed polarity, agreement	<i>Nice day, eh? [isn't it]</i>
2. Reversed polarity, confirmation	<i>It goes over here, eh? [doesn't it?]</i>
3. Constant polarity	<i>Oh, you're still here, eh? [are you?]</i>
4. Imperative	<i>Think about it, eh?</i>
5. Exclamation	<i>What a game, eh?</i>
6. Wh-interrogative	<i>What are they trying to do, eh?</i>
7. Narrative	<i>This guy is up on the 27th floor, eh, then he gets out on the ledge, eh</i>
8. Pardon	<i>Eh, what did you say?</i>

Gibson's categories are shown on the left of Table 1; the corresponding survey questions are shown on the right. Gibson's descriptions of polarity refer to the polarity that would be reflected in standard tags, as I have indicated in the square brackets after the sample sentences.

This paper focuses on the results of a survey of *eh* usage conducted on students at the University of Toronto. Section 2 presents the questions and format of the survey used. Section 3 gives the results for respondents who are Canadian born, have English as their first language and are under 30 years of age. These 2004 results are then compared in Section 4 with the results of the earlier surveys mentioned above. Results for recent immigrants are discussed in Section 5 and compared with the results of Canadian born speakers. Respondents' comments about *eh* are presented in Section 6 and my findings are summarized in Section 7.

2. Questionnaire: Questions and Format

The questions used in the 2004 survey are shown in Table 2. These questions were based on those used in the Ottawa and Vancouver surveys with one deletion and five additions. The questions new to the survey are indicated with an asterisk. The imperative sentence in Table 1 has a confrontational tone and so a second example of command was added. Two fixed expressions were added: *Thanks, eh?* which had also been added to the Vancouver survey, and *I know, eh?* on the suggestion of several students. Based on Johnson's (1976) claims that *eh* could be used with insults and accusations, an example of each was added. The sentence *Oh, you're still here, eh?* was eliminated as it seemed to combine the categories of statement of fact and accusation. This brought the survey to a total of 10 categories with 12 examples.

Table 2: Questions used in 2004 Toronto Survey (*new to this survey)

Type of Eh	Sample Sentence
1. Statements of opinion	<i>Nice day, eh?</i>
2. Statements of fact	<i>It goes over here, eh?</i>
3. Commands	*i. <i>Open the window, eh?</i>
	ii. <i>Think about it, eh?</i>
4. Exclamations	<i>What a game, eh?</i>
5. Questions	<i>What are they trying to do, eh?</i>
6. To mean 'pardon'	<i>Eh? What did you say?</i>
7. In fixed expressions	*i. <i>Thanks, eh?</i>
	*ii. <i>I know, eh?</i>
8. Insults	* <i>You're a real snob, eh?</i>
9. Accusations	* <i>You took the last piece, eh?</i>
10. Telling a story	<i>This guy is up on the 27th floor, eh? then he gets out on the ledge, eh . . .</i>

The survey questions used to gather personal information, the respondents' use of *eh*, and their attitudes towards the different constructions are

shown in Figure 1. One problem with this method of self-reporting is that many speakers are unaware of their own use of *eh*. Nonetheless, while the amount of use may be underreported, I believe that the overall results reflect well the patterns of use in this population.

Figure 1: Format of 2004 Toronto Survey Questions

Please provide the following information about yourself by circling the appropriate responses.			
1. Age range:	under 30	30-55	over 55
2. Sex:	male	female	
3. Is English your first language?	yes	no	
3a. Were you born in Canada?	yes	no	
3b. If not, how many years have you have lived in Canada?	under 2	2-5	6-10 years more than 10
Each of the following sentences illustrate a type of use of <i>eh</i> ? For each one you will be asked to indicate whether you have heard <i>eh</i> used in this way, whether you yourself ever use it this way, and what your attitude is to this usage. In assessing your attitude, think of your immediate reaction on hearing this expression. The choices mean:			
	positive	I have a positive feeling about the speaker.	
	neutral	I have a neutral feeling about the speaker.	
	negative	I have a negative feeling about the speaker.	
1. After statements of opinion, like:	<i>Nice day, eh?</i>		
a. Have you heard this type of use?	yes	no	
b. Do you use it yourself?	never	sometimes	often
c. Your attitude to this usage is:	positive	neutral	negative

The respondents were students enrolled in the Introduction to Linguistics course at the University of Toronto. There were 30 males and 61 females who were Canadian born, with English as their first language and under 30 years of age. There were 5 males and 13 females in the recent immigrant group; these respondents were under 30 years of age, had been in Canada 5 years or less and did not have English as their first language.

3. Results: Canadian Born Respondents

The results for recognition of the different types of *eh* are shown in Table 3; the three expressions with the highest recognition rates are shaded. They are: *eh* with opinions, *eh* with exclamations and the expression *I know, eh?* There is good recognition of all the types of *eh* presented, with over 50% recognition in each case, ranging up to 100%.

Table 4 shows results for the use of *eh*. The same three constructions are at the top, appreciably higher than the other uses, which range down to a low of 16% for the narrative *eh*. The shaded rows are those with differences between male and female use: women use *I know, eh?* and *eh* with an exclamation more

than men; men report more frequent use of the accusation, statement of fact, and the imperative *Open the window, eh?*

Table 3: Have you heard this type of use? Yes

	Male	Female	All
	%	%	%
1. <i>Nice day, eh?</i>	97	100	99
4. <i>What a game, eh?</i>	93	98	97
7ii. <i>I know, eh?</i>	83	98	93
7i. <i>Thanks, eh?</i>	69	80	77
8. <i>You're a real snob, eh?</i>	72	75	74
3ii. <i>Think about it, eh?</i>	72	73	73
9. <i>You took the last piece, eh?</i>	86	67	73
6. <i>Eh? What did you say?</i>	59	77	71
2. <i>It goes over here, eh?</i>	76	62	67
10. <i>This guy is up on the 27th floor, eh? then . . .</i>	66	67	67
3i. <i>Open the window, eh?</i>	66	51	56
5. <i>What are they trying to do, eh?</i>	59	55	56
Average	75	75	75

Table 4: Do you use it yourself? Yes (sometimes + often)

	Male	Female	All
	%	%	%
7ii. <i>I know, eh?</i>	72	92	85
1. <i>Nice day, eh?</i>	72	80	78
4. <i>What a game, eh?</i>	59	80	73
7i. <i>Thanks, eh?</i>	52	53	53
9. <i>You took the last piece, eh?</i>	66	38	47
3ii. <i>Think about it, eh?</i>	38	49	46
6. <i>Eh? What did you say?</i>	41	38	39
8. <i>You're a real snob, eh?</i>	34	37	36
2. <i>It goes over here, eh?</i>	55	25	34
5. <i>What are they trying to do, eh?</i>	31	23	26
3i. <i>Open the window, eh?</i>	45	13	23
10. <i>This guy is up on the 27th floor, eh? then . . .</i>	24	12	16
Average	49	45	46

With respect to frequent use, shown in Table 5, the same three types of *eh* are at the top, but the gap between the most frequently used expression *I know, eh?* and the following two, has widened. Over 50% of respondents report using *I know, eh?* frequently. This is almost twice as high as the percentage of respondents reporting frequent use of the next two, the exclamation and opinion. The other types of *eh* show considerably lower reports of frequent use, with the

narrative and imperative at the bottom. The differences seen between men and women in Table 4 are much less evident in these results of frequent use.

Table 5: Do you use it yourself? Often

	Male	Female	All
	%	%	%
7ii. <i>I know, eh?</i>	52	53	53
4. <i>What a game, eh?</i>	24	30	28
1. <i>Nice day, eh?</i>	28	25	26
7i. <i>Thanks, eh?</i>	10	15	13
6. <i>Eh? What did you say?</i>	14	12	12
3ii. <i>Think about it, eh?</i>	10	8	9
8. <i>You're a real snob, eh?</i>	10	8	9
9. <i>You took the last piece, eh?</i>	14	5	8
2. <i>It goes over here, eh?</i>	7	3	4
5. <i>What are they trying to do, eh?</i>	3	2	2
10. <i>This guy is up on the 27th floor, eh? then . . .</i>	3	2	2
3i. <i>Open the window, eh?</i>	0	2	1
Average	15	14	14

Language attitudes can be difficult to evaluate. The actual content of the example sentences, such as the positive sentiments expressed in *Nice day, eh?*, might influence the attitude expressed towards the construction itself. The respondents' attitudes to the different constructions are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Attitude to Usage

Your attitude to this usage is:	Negative			Positive		
	M	F	All	M	F	All
	%	%	%	%	%	%
10. <i>This guy is up on the 27th floor, eh? then . . .</i>	34	57	49	3	2	2
3i. <i>Open the window, eh?</i>	45	49	48	7	3	4
2. <i>It goes over here, eh?</i>	34	43	40	10	8	9
8. <i>You're a real snob, eh?</i>	38	35	36	7	8	8
5. <i>What are they trying to do, eh?</i>	31	32	31	7	3	4
6. <i>Eh? What did you say?</i>	24	35	31	10	10	10
9. <i>You took the last piece, eh?</i>	28	30	29	10	8	9
3ii. <i>Think about it, eh?</i>	24	18	20	3	15	11
7i. <i>Thanks, eh?</i>	14	15	17	28	30	29
1. <i>Nice day, eh?</i>	14	7	9	41	43	42
7ii. <i>I know, eh?</i>	17	3	8	52	48	49
4. <i>What a game, eh?</i>	10	3	6	34	49	44

Not surprisingly, expressions with the most negative ratings are those that

are least used and the expressions with the most positive ratings are those most frequently used: narrative and imperative *eh* elicited the most negative responses and the opinion, exclamation and *I know, eh?* the most positive. Again there are some differences between the male and female responses, with women showing a higher negative response to the narrative *eh* and a higher positive response to the exclamation *What a game, eh?*.

4. Comparison of 2004 Results With Results of Earlier Surveys

Table 7 shows a comparison of the 2004 results with the surveys done in Vancouver and Ottawa. The results for *eh* from the Ottawa and Vancouver surveys have never been compared before. It can be seen that while they show similar patterns of responses, the overall numbers are much higher for Ottawa than for Vancouver. None of the Vancouver results are higher than 50% whereas more than half of the Ottawa responses are over 50%. This suggests that *eh* is used more in central Canada than in the west, and the results from Toronto, also in central Canada, are very close to the Ottawa rates. The average of the seven questions common to the surveys are practically identical for Toronto and Ottawa, indicating that usage has remained fairly constant over the last two decades. It should be noted that the Vancouver results in Table 7 may be lower than the actual rates of use, for the authors state that the 'yes' response indicates acceptance, and apparently reflects a grammaticality judgement as well as use.

Table 7: Comparison 2004 Survey to 1980 Ottawa, Vancouver Surveys

Use/Acceptance	2004	1980	1980
	Toronto	Ottawa	Vancouver
	%	%	%
1. <i>Nice day, eh?</i>	78	72	39
4. <i>What a game, eh?</i>	73	73	45
7i. <i>Thanks, eh?</i>	53	n/a	9
3 ii. <i>Think about it, eh?</i>	46	52	34
6. <i>Eh? What did you say?</i>	39	43	13
2. <i>It goes over here, eh?</i>	34	58	29
5. <i>What are they trying to do, eh?</i>	26	15	15
10. <i>This guy is up on the 27th floor, eh?...</i>	16	6	13
<i>Oh, you're still here, eh?</i>	n/a	64	45
Average (7 questions in common)	45	46	27

The Ottawa survey reported attitude results for only three of the sentences, all described as 'abhorrence'. These are shown in Table 8 along with the results for the 2004 survey. It is not explained how these Ottawa attitudes were collected. The Toronto speakers are apparently less accepting of the pardon *eh* and interrogative *eh* than the Ottawa respondents. However; the attitudes towards narrative *eh?* are strikingly similar in the two surveys, with almost 50% of respondents expressing a negative attitude or abhorrence.

Table 8: Comparison 2004 Student Attitudes to 1980 Ottawa Survey

% of respondents expressing:	1980 Ottawa	2004 Toronto
	Abhorrence	Attitude: Negative
<i>This guy is up on the 27th floor, eh?</i>	47	49
<i>Eh? What did you say?</i>	16	31
<i>What are they trying to do, eh?</i>	12	31

The results for student respondents for *eh* meaning 'pardon' in the 1972 Survey of Canadian English are shown in Table 9, along with the corresponding 2004 results. These results suggest that this use of *eh* has increased in the past thirty years, even though almost one third of the 2004 respondents rated it negatively (Table 6). The Survey of Canadian English also published results according to province, as shown in Table 10. The results for both questions are quite consistent across the country, with British Columbia as high as the other provinces. This provides support to the suggestion above that the results in the Survey of Vancouver English are lower than actual usage. The results for Quebec are somewhat higher than the rest of the country for *eh* meaning 'pardon', and have perhaps been influenced by the similar function of the Canadian French *hein*. The authors comment that the use of *eh* for 'pardon' "has been cited as distinctively Canadian" (Scargill & Warkentyne: 75); it may be Canadian but the results show that it is used much less than other types of *eh*.

Table 9: Comparison 2004 Student Use to Survey of Canadian English

	2004 Toronto		1972 SCE	
	Male	Female	Male Student	Female Student
<i>Eh? What did you say?</i>	41	38	27	24

Table 10: Provincial Results Survey of Canadian English: Students

	Do you use <i>eh</i> for <i>What did you say?</i> Yes (Yes + Sometimes)		Do you use <i>eh</i> in , e.g., <i>So that's what he thinks, eh?</i> Yes (Yes + Sometimes)	
	M	F	M	F
Nfld	30	24	68	79
PEI	25	28	72	84
NS	21	17	71	76
NB	25	27	74	83
Que	37	39	65	77
Ont	27	24	66	76
Man	30	19	76	80
Sask	27	19	74	78
Alta	28	16	70	78
BC	22	22	70	81
Total	27	24	70	79

Table 11 compares the 2004 results with the Love's 1973 results in Edmonton. The responses are very close for the opinion, exclamation and imperative. While the responses differ for the two wh-questions, Love's interrogative has accusatory overtones and shows a close response to the 2004 accusation. Since the responses for *eh* in Toronto and Edmonton are quite similar, even after a gap of 30 years, one can conclude both that the use of *eh* is fairly consistent across Canada, as seen with the results in Table 10, and that there has been little change in the use of *eh* over the course of a generation.

Table 11: Comparison 2004 Students' Use to Love 1973 Edmonton

1973 Edmonton		2004 Toronto	
	Accepted	Used	
<i>The sun is too hot, eh?</i>	80	78	<i>Nice day, eh?</i>
<i>What an admission, eh?</i> <i>How about that, eh?</i>	80	73	<i>What a game, eh?</i>
<i>Listen to me eh?</i>	49	46	<i>Think about it, eh?</i>
<i>What have you got to say for yourself, eh?</i>	54	26	<i>What are they trying to do, eh?</i>
		47	<i>You took the last piece, eh?</i>

5. Results for Recent Immigrant Speakers

The recognition rates for the small group of recent immigrants are shown in Table 12. When compared with Table 3, it can be seen that, as expected, immigrants have a lower rate of recognition than the native speakers.

Table 12: Recent Immigrants: Have you heard this type of use? Yes

	Male (5)		Female (13)		All (18)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
1. <i>Nice day, eh?</i>	4	80	13	100	17	94
4. <i>What a game, eh?</i>	4	80	12	92	16	89
6. <i>Eh? What did you say?</i>	5	100	10	77	15	83
9. <i>You took the last piece, eh?</i>	5	100	10	77	15	83
2. <i>It goes over here, eh?</i>	4	80	9	69	13	72
3ii. <i>Think about it, eh?</i>	2	40	11	85	13	72
8. <i>You're a real snob, eh?</i>	5	100	7	54	12	67
10. <i>This guy is up on the 27th floor, eh? then</i>	3	60	8	62	11	61
5. <i>What are they trying to do, eh?</i>	2	40	7	54	9	50
7ii. <i>I know, eh?</i>	1	20	8	62	9	50
7i. <i>Thanks, eh?</i>	1	20	4	31	5	28
3i. <i>Open the window, eh?</i>	0	0	3	23	3	17

Although overall the recognition rates are lower than for the native speakers, there are very high rates of recognition for the opinion and exclamation, in particular. Conversely, there is a surprisingly low recognition rate among new immigrants for *I know, eh?* considering that 85% of their fellow students claim to use it and over half claim to use it frequently.

Table 13 shows the use of *eh* by the recent immigrants. Although these students have been in Canada for less than five years, already two-thirds claim to use *eh* with opinions, 56% use *eh* with exclamations and 50% use *eh* for 'pardon'.

Table 13: Recent Immigrants
Do you use it yourself? Yes (sometimes + often)

	Male		Female		All	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
1. <i>Nice day, eh?</i>	3	60	9	69	12	67
6. <i>Eh? What did you say?</i>	3	60	7	53	10	56
9. <i>You took the last piece, eh?</i>	5	100	4	31	9	50
4. <i>What a game, eh?</i>	3	60	5	38	8	44
2. <i>It goes over here, eh?</i>	3	60	4	31	7	39
8. <i>You're a real snob, eh?</i>	4	80	3	23	7	39
3ii. <i>Think about it, eh?</i>	1	20	5	38	6	33
5. <i>What are they trying to do, eh?</i>	2	40	4	31	6	33
7ii. <i>I know, eh?</i>	1	20	4	31	5	28
10. <i>This guy is up on the 27th floor, eh? then</i>	3	60	1	8	4	22
7i. <i>Thanks, eh?</i>	0	0	2	15	2	11
3i. <i>Open the window, eh?</i>	0	0	1	8	1	6

As was noted with recognition rates, the immigrants' usage rates do not reflect the pattern of use they hear from native speakers. This can be seen in Table 14 where the responses of the native Canadian speakers regarding use (Table 4) are compared with the use reported by the new immigrants. On the one hand, immigrant speakers do not seem to be picking up set expressions like *Thanks, eh?* and *I know, eh?*. On the other hand, their use of *eh* for pardon is higher than that of native speakers.

One explanation for the immigrants' different pattern of use might lie in their interpretation of the function of *eh*. It is possible that the immigrants are interpreting *eh* as strictly as a question particle, equivalent to tags like 'isn't it' or 'don't you think'. This interpretation of *eh* is consistent with *eh* following statements of opinion, accusations or fact; these can all be rephrased as questions, such as *Nice day, isn't it?* or *It goes over here, doesn't it?* However, this question particle meaning of *eh* is not compatible with expressions like *Thanks* or *I know* which make no sense when rephrased as questions. This would

explain why immigrants are not picking up these expressions as quickly as some of the others, even though they are exposed frequently to them.

Table 14: Compare Usage: Immigrants & Native Speakers (Table 4)
Do you use it yourself? Yes (sometimes + often)

	native	immigrants
	%	%
7ii. <i>I know, eh?</i>	85	28
1. <i>Nice day, eh?</i>	78	67
4. <i>What a game, eh?</i>	73	44
7i. <i>Thanks, eh?</i>	53	11
9. <i>You took the last piece, eh?</i>	47	50
3ii. <i>Think about it, eh?</i>	46	33
6. <i>Eh? What did you say?</i>	39	56
8. <i>You're a real snob, eh?</i>	36	39
2. <i>It goes over here, eh?</i>	34	39
5. <i>What are they trying to do, eh?</i>	26	33
3i. <i>Open the window, eh?</i>	23	6
10. <i>This guy is up on the 27th floor, eh? then</i>	16	22
Average	46	36

6. Respondents' Comments

Respondents were asked to describe the speaker of sentence 10, the narrative *eh* - *This guy is up on the 27th floor, eh? then he gets out on the ledge, eh. . .* A fairly consistent picture emerges from these responses: the speaker was perceived to be uneducated, rural, and lower class. That is, the speaker had traits not shared by the respondents, who were educated students at an urban university, most likely of middle class backgrounds. Other characteristics mentioned were: male and Canadian, or, an American trying to imitate a Canadian. It is clear that the narrative *eh* is considered to be both stereotypically Canadian and highly stigmatized, a fact reflected in the highly negative attitudes assigned to this use.

Several students remarked that *eh* is not used as often as "some people think" or as often as non-Canadians think Canadians use it. As well, some students noted that they used *hey* rather than *eh* in some of the contexts.

7. Conclusions

This survey led to several interesting findings. First, it has been clearly shown that in any discussion of *eh* it is important to differentiate between the different types of *eh*. There is a wide range in the rates of recognition and use of the different types of *eh* and in the attitudes towards towards. Among native Canadian speakers usage ranged from 16% for narrative *eh* to 85% for *I know, eh?* Three types of *eh* were consistently high in recognition, use and positive attitudes: *eh* with opinions, as in *Nice day, eh?*, *eh* with exclamations, as in *What*

a game, eh?, and the expression *I know, eh?*. It may be that when students protest that they do not use *eh* very much, they are referring to the stereotypical stigmatized narrative *eh*, which they indeed do not use very much, and are not considering other more positively viewed and frequently used constructions.

From comparisons with earlier surveys, it can be concluded that the use of *eh* has not diminished over the past 30 years, and may have even increased with some types of constructions. The 2004 results were very close to the 1980 Ottawa results and the 1973 results from Edmonton. Despite the lower results from Vancouver, the evidence from the cross-Canada Survey of Canadian English and from Love's Edmonton survey suggest that the use of *eh* is fairly consistent across the country.

Although the typical user of narrative *eh* was described as male, there is no evidence that men use *eh* more than women do. The overall rates are very similar, especially with respect to frequent use. There is, however, some variation between the different expressions, with women reporting more use of *I know, eh?* and *eh* with exclamations, and men reporting more use of *eh* with accusations, imperatives and statements of fact.

New immigrants quickly pick up the use of *eh*, with two-thirds reporting use of *eh* with opinions after less than five years in Canada. They associate the use of *eh* with their developing Canadian identity: one speaker, who had been in Canada for less than two years, said, "I was kind of proud when it slipped out of my mouth the first time." Their usage patterns, however, do not consistently reflect those of Canadian born speakers: apparently they do not pick up the set expressions *Thanks, eh?* and *I know, eh?* as quickly as other uses of *eh*. This suggests that new immigrants are interpreting *eh* as a question particle only.

This study raises many interesting questions for further research. Are there common uses of *eh* that were missed in this survey? Does the use of *eh* vary with class and age? Do rural speakers use *eh* more than urban speakers? Are there variations in usage from coast to coast? Who uses *hey* instead of *eh*, and in which contexts? Which uses of *eh* are specifically Canadian? How has Canadian French *hein* influenced Canadian *eh*? How can the function of *eh* be described? There is still much to learn about the Canadian *eh*.

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