

C, eh? N, eh? D, eh? Canada!

Canadian speech is frequently peppered with the filler word 'eh'. More than an interjection during pauses, this has become a defining characteristic of Canadian speech. Read below as editor Margaret Godoy explains the various uses and cultural references where 'eh' occurs.

Ask someone to think of Canada, and nine times out of ten they will squeeze their eyes shut and conjure up vast landscapes of cold mountains, of snow and hockey. Land of the silver birch, home of the beaver, and – to be fair – they wouldn't be far off. Any amount of variation upon the endless themes of nature, wildlife, cold, and poutine could be expected. However, ask someone to imitate a Canadian and there's only one possible response: the *eh*.

I tried this experiment with a Danish friend of mine, Rikke, who studied abroad for a year in Sarnia, Canada. This is how the conversation played out:

Me: *Hey Rikke, I'm writing an article on Canadian culture and stereotypes. Care to comment?*

Rikke: *"Let's go and play hockey, eh?" That's a real Canadian sentence.*

Not only does this phrase incorporate Canada's national obsession with hockey, but it fully embraces the peculiar linguistic tick that has come to symbolize Canada and Canadians just as much as snow and ice and

beavers do. It is versatile, it is ubiquitous, it is the *eh*.

Eh? Not following? Let me explain more clearly. *Eh* is the expression, or filler word, most widely associated with Canadian English. It is of popular belief that if you engage a Canadian in conversation, they will constantly interject *eh* in front of, in between, and at the end of their sentences, depending on the context.

Eh has many uses, of which at least ten have been identified. The different types of *eh* are used in statements of fact (it's cold out, *eh?*), commands (don't forget, *eh?*), a way of saying "pardon me" (*eh?* What was that you said?), and in the telling of narratives (I was walking to the hockey rink, *eh*, when I realized I forgot my skates), to name just a few.

This short two letter interjection has been the subject of much academic study and debate, and these studies are preoccupied with exactly how Canadian *eh* is. Some academics insist that it is uniquely Canadian. For example, in Mark M. Orkin's book *Speaking Canadian English*, it's stated that *eh* is "so



exclusively a Canadian feature that immigration officials use it as an identifying clue.” Others make the argument that *eh* is a linguistic feature that is found in many English speaking nations, and therefore cannot be solely attributed to Canadian culture. For instance, *eh* exists in Africa, but it is purely used as an affirmative sound and is usually more drawn out: *ehhhhh*.

In my own humble Canadian experience, *eh* is widely used throughout Canada although certain demographics certainly use it less than others, for instance: new immigrants. Matt, a Canadian living abroad, says “I think different people use *eh* in different ways, but they all use it whether they admit it or not. It’s probably a question of class. Rural folk would be more proud of their usage of *eh* as it is part of their Canadian culture, whereas the bourgeoisie would be more likely to claim they speak proper English.”

I think it is important to make the distinction that academics are the ones who are fuelling this debate, because according to the rest of the world, *eh* is so typically Canadian that it is frequently satirized. And by satirized, I mean we get laughed at.

There are a plethora of Canadian television shows - Great White North, the Red Green Show, The Royal Canadian Air Farce, This Hour Has 22 Minutes, The Rick Mercer Report - that poke fun at all the great Canadian stereotypes, *eh* included. This is

not to say that popular American television and film doesn’t do its fair share of teasing. South Park devoted an entire episode to the blaming of Canada, while Hollywood does its bit too. What’s more, American pop culture has a way of reaching audiences across the world, and this has played a large role in spreading the magic of the Canadian *eh*.

The pervasiveness of *eh* was made apparent to me when I was eighteen, the first time I ever lived abroad by myself. When I was very young, my family moved overseas because of my dad’s job and we lived in several countries. Even upon return to Canada we moved around, living in a few different cities in Ontario. For this reason, I think, I never noticed the use of *eh* in my speech. That is, I never noticed it until the Disney film Brother Bear was released while I was living in Denmark.

Brother Bear is a feature-length cartoon that in true Disney style stars various speaking animal characters, including two moose. These moose characters, Rutt and Tuke, are voiced by the famous Canadian hosier heroes, Doug and Bob Mckenzie, from the TV show Great White North. In 2004 I moved to Denmark for a year and, to my surprise, I became more Canadian than I had ever been before, because living overseas has a way of making you cling to your roots. All the Danish kids, with Rutt and Tuke’s dopey caricature of Canadians fresh in mind, loved pointing out exactly how often I



did use *eh*.

At first, I was utterly surprised at the rate that previously unnoticed *ehs* popped out of my mouth. After surprise came denial, and then finally acceptance. In the end, there was really nothing else to say, except: I guess I'm pretty Canadian after all, *eh*?

