

EH!?



The Ultimate Emblem of Citizenship

First, a fable. The tribes of Gilead are at war with the Ephraimites. Gilead controls the mountain passes, and thousands of Ephraimites are trapped behind enemy lines. In desperation, a band of Ephraimites, indistinguishable in appearance from the Gileadites, attempts to get through.

When those Ephraimites which were escaped said "Let me go over"... the men of Gilead said unto them, "Art thou an Ephraimite?" If he said "Nay," then said they unto him. "Say no Shibboleth." And he said "Sibboleth" for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passage of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand. - Judges 12:5-6

Aside from the obvious theological lessons and the ethical questions that are raised, "What if it was some poor Gileadite with a speech impediment?", this biblical tale has given us a very useful term: shibboleth, meaning "a distinct word or pronunciation that sets one group apart from another."

In Canada, the national shibboleth is as elemental as the first letter in the alphabet, as ineffable as an autumn rain, as elusive as a summer sigh. **In a word: EH?**

Eh? is what separates Canadians from the unwashed envious hordes outside their national boundaries. You know who you are. **Eh? is the secret password, the cross Canada countersign, a two letter, single syllable symphony that takes years of diligent study to master.** It must flow naturally into the sentence. It must never stand out, never call attention to itself and yet must remain inextricably linked to the harmonial whole. It should trip melodiously off the tongue. "Howzit goin' eh?"

According to an article by Harold B. Allen in *Canadian English: Origins and Structures*, the use of eh? "is so exclusively Canadian feature that immigration officials use it as an identifying clue." Scary eh? **Mind you, Allen doesn't make it clear whether it is used by Canadian immigration officials to allow Canadians in or by foreign immigration officials to keep Canadians out.**

Now, at this point, you may feel that we have been giving too much attention to what is, after all, a single syllable. But consider the following actual statement by Thomas M. Paikeday, as quotes in the *Dictionary of Canadian Quotations*. "Utterances like 'eh?'," writes Paikeday, "are the relics of the animal cries from which human speech arose. If one tribe of people is more addicted to one of these interjections, it is solely a matter of cultural identity."

WOW! All this time, what Canadians assumed was just a linguistic nervous tic is, in actuality, an "instinctive utterance", an animal cry.

Priddy cool eh?

- Excerpts from "How to be a Canadian" by Will and Ian Ferguson