

# When yes means no and no means yes

**Y**EAH, no, I totally agree. Laurie Bauer's recent discussion in this column of how the double positive "yeah, right" makes a negative prompted Marg Conal to e-mail us about the use of "yeah, nah" and "nah, yeah".

Marg wrote of this as a Kiwi habit, developed over the past 10 years or so. The time estimate is about right, though there may have been earlier instances before this combination of a positive and a negative became noticed. But it is not a distinctive Kiwi trait, and has been well documented for Australian English, and noticed in other varieties.

Two of our linguistics colleagues in Melbourne, Kate Burridge and Margaret Foley, wrote of "yeah-no" in the *Australian Journal of Linguistics* in 2002, basing their piece on data they started collecting in Brisbane in 1998.

Burridge and Foley found that "yeah-no" had several functions, though it is not always clear which and how many of these the speaker might be trying to get across at one time. One use they noticed is a kind of contraction of two propositions, where both the "yeah" and the "no" seem to be meant. It is as if the speaker wants to acknowledge that what someone has just said might be correct, but at the same time deflect its implications.

"Yeah-no" is also often found in responses to a comment or question that contains a negative. If someone says "You haven't lived here very long" you might reply "yeah-no, not long", meaning "yes, I agree with you" and "no, I haven't lived here long". They also note "no, yeah" being used in a similar way, but comment that this ordering is less frequent and the words tend not to be run together in the same way as "yeah-no".

Sometimes, "yeah-no" seems to show emphatic agreement, almost as if the "no" is pre-empting a possible contradiction from the listener. It may even be used to show emphatic disagreement, though this may be something that varies according to the variety of English you speak. In one on-line slang dictionary for American English I have found "yeah-no" interpreted as a "smooth" way to say "f.. no".

Something interesting in the analysis of "yeah-no" is that it most often does not have these kinds of connections to the content of previous conversational turns. Instead, it seems to help the conversational flow by taking things back a step,



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to some previously unfinished business: A: "Have you met Laurie Bauer?" B: "I've read his columns. Yeah-no, I've never met him." So "yeah-no" in these cases does not really mean "yes" or "no" but simply connects bits of conversation together.

"Yeah-no" can be a way of introducing a new topic of conversation, often at the beginning of speaker's turn, or after a noticeable pause.

Burridge and Foley also talk of the use of "yeah-no" as what they call "verbal cuddling", building solidarity between participants in a conversation. This is seen in how it is used in responding to apologies, as in A: "I'm really sorry I'm late." B: "Yeah-no, that's okay." It can down-play a compliment — A: "That's a beautiful dress." B: "Yeah-no, it's quite pretty." Or soften a refusal — A: "I want you to come to the party with me." B: "Yeah-no, I'd like to, but."

It is not unusual to find different functions for a single expression, and there may even be some historical sequence to how these uses have come about, from the more literal "yes, I agree that no, I haven't lived here long" to the use of "yeah-no" as a conversational management tool. It may parallel the development of other "discourse markers" such as "just" or "like" from their literal meanings to their more frequent current functions in conversation, as in "That's like really interesting". The next questions for the linguist are, of course, who says "yeah-no", and is it spreading?

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