

SAN ANTONIO TALK

The major portion of our San Antonio talk occurs in normal conversation, when one person talks and somebody else listens. In those conversations, we learned several years ago, the talker could interject the phrase *you know* after breath pauses.

You know, as when someone says: "The other day, *you know*, I was driving to the store, when, *you know*, I see out of the corner of my eye, *you know*, these weird guys standing on the corner."

Language purists, of course, complained when that *you know* change occurred. Nonetheless, *you know* has allowed the English language to mature considerably. In conversation, you see, real talkers like to know if their listeners really care about the direction the conversation is taking; real talkers care if their listeners understand what the talker is saying.

Hey! I'm serious. Linguists study this kind of spoken language. We think a larger portion of everyday communication occurs through spoken conversation rather than through formal dialogue or through writing. Conversation is to language what softball is to sports. More people participate in or watch softball than any other sport. More people participate in and (over)hear conversation than any other language type. Therefore, to understand the true nature of language, one needs to study and believe in spoken English more than formal written or spoken English. (Yes, I know. The news media does not believe in softball as much as they do the high profile sports. But so what? They also believe in the guile of standard written English.)

But, back to purists and their grunting. Before the 1970s, listeners involved in conversations just nodded their heads and grunted *unh* or *huh* or *hmhh* or some such guttural, animalistic, response, whenever they felt the talkers needed encouragement. Yes, even the language purists did that grunting.

Now, however, the conversational talkers can ask for feedback, taking the guesswork and the grunting away. The talkers interject their *you know* and the listeners seize the opportunity to respond.

"So," you ask, "How do they respond? With orchestrated grunts?"

"No," the linguists answer, "they respond with a series of conversational English responses: *Yeah!* or *Yes!* or *That's right!*"

"So," a handful of you who really care ask, "How fine-tuned has your linguistic research categorized these answers?" Good question!

In San Antonio Talk, half of us respond to *you know* with *yeah!* True, that's not a whole lot better than a grunt; but you have to admit, *yeah* represents barely recognizable English, nonetheless. As for the other half of the responses? Twenty-one percent move into real English, with *Yes!*; twelve percent with *That's right!* The rest of us play around with *Oh, yeah!*, *Oh, yes!*, *OK!*, *Right!*, and that Southwest shibboleth *Yep!*

"So," I respond to the talker in my opening conversation, "Tell me more about these weird guys. Did they speak English?"

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03/24/96