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The use of *uh-huh* in British conversation, TV transcripts and fictional dialogue: Affirmative answer, backchannel or something else?



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# Aim and research question

Investigate the use of the response form *uh-huh* in three different registers of British English: spontaneous conversation, TV transcripts and fictional dialogue

- The frequency of response forms varies a lot in different corpora (registers) of American English (Jucker 2021)
- Other features of orality (response forms are one kind), e.g. *uh*, *um* and *er* (Am.) have different functions depending on register and positions within the clause (Tottie 2017)

Does *uh-huh* have different functions in different registers in British English?

## Definitions of *uh-huh*

*OED*: adv. colloquial (originally U.S., 1853-), used to express **assent** or **agreement**, or as a **non-committal response** to a question or remark.

*Merriam-Webster*: interjection, used to indicate **affirmation**, **agreement**, or **gratification**

*GPT-4*: an informal expression used in *spoken language* to indicate **agreement**, **acknowledgement**, or **affirmation**. It is a **backchannel** response often used in conversation to convey that the listener is actively **engaged** and is in **agreement** with what the speaker is saying. In *written* form, "uh-huh" is often used to represent a non-verbal vocalization, conveying a **positive response**.

# Examples

S0084: mm (.) cos um you know Sophie who works the operat- she 's operations manager ?

S0037: yeah

S0084: it 's her fortieth next week

S0037: **uh-huh**

S0084: and she 's having um a big do at The Fountain

S0037: oh (S48K 449)

Fixed turn-taking order

- Narrator (speaker A)
- Respondent/Listener (speaker B: *uh-huh*)
- Narrator (speaker A)

It could hardly have been clearer. He wants an annulment.

**Uh-huh.**

And you're the only person in Christendom who can give it to him.

**Uh-huh.** (*The Borgias: Siblings*, 2013)

Are you sure you still want to go ahead with today's Check & Send? the man says.

**Uh huh**, Elisabeth says.

Could you say the word yes, rather than just make that vaguely affirmative sound you're making, please, the man says.

Uh, Elisabeth says. Yes. (*AliSmi4.4719379*)

# Corpus resources

<b>Spoken BNC2014</b>	<b>TV Corpus (IE/UK)</b>	<b>Corpus of British Fiction</b>
Approx. 11.5 million words of transcribed spontaneous spoken British English	Approx. 53.2 million words transcribed TV dialogue, from 300 UK and Irish TV series	Approx. 130 million words of fiction, mostly general and crime fiction
Collected 2012-2016	Coverage 1950-2017	Books published 1900-2019

# Challenges and caveats

- No access to the sound files/TV shows
- Poorly documented transcription guidelines (crowdsourcing?)
- The transcription of *uh-huh* (*uhu*, *uh huh*, *uhhuh*) in the sources
- The speech situation: 2 or more speakers; interviews
- Punctuation marks, apart from question mark, are not transcribed in the Spoken BNC2014 data

## Raw frequencies (occ. of *uh-huh*, *uh huh*, *uhu* (BNC), *uhhuh*)

Spoken BNC2014	TV Corpus (IE/UK)	Corpus of British Fiction
3,107	1,114	231
272 per mill. words	20.9 per mill. words	1.8 per mill. words (9.9)

- **BNC2014:** One speaker accounts for 374 of all *uh-huh* (*uh huh*) (personal discourse marker?)
- **TVCorpus:** Very different types of TV series/shows, some with many instances (*Grand Tours of Scotland / Scottish ...*: 48, *Peep Show*: 44, *Avengers*: 37, *All Creatures Great and Small*: 26)
- **CBF:** Contains mostly narrative language (if we assume on average 18% direct speech (Ebeling & Ebeling 2020)), this gives us 9.9 occ. per mill. words; cf. Jucker 2015)



# Material and method

1. Randomly extracted 200 instances from each corpus:
  - nearly all in the CBF
2. Classified each instance according to:
  - function based on immediate co-text (collocates) to the right

In the example below *uh-huh* was classified as constituting a separate, complete sentence with the function assent/agreement

"You've done a pregnancy test already?"

"Aye, last week."

"And it was definitely positive."

"**Uh-huh.**" She started to press the keys on her computer. (AnnDon1.7456832)

## Function of *uh-huh*

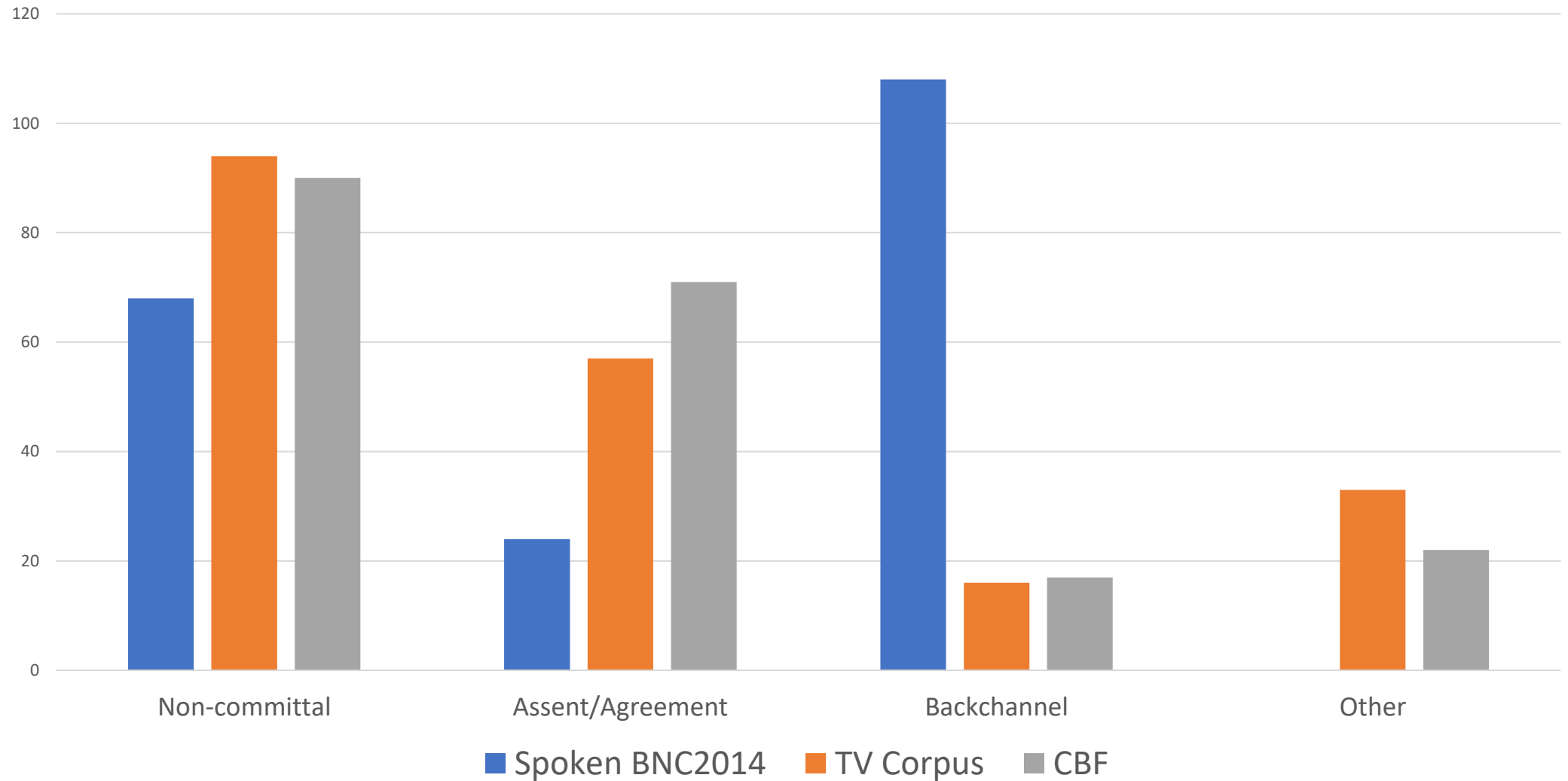


Table 1. Token frequency 3R of *uh-huh*

Spoken BNC2014	TV Corpus (IE/UK)	Corpus of British Fiction
and <sup>(49)</sup>	. <sup>(207)</sup>	" <sup>(208)</sup>
(.) <sup>(25)</sup>	-- <sup>(27)</sup>	. <sup>(105)</sup>
's	?	,
it	,	...
I	uh-huh	?
you <sup>(18)</sup>	you <sup>(17)</sup>	uh-huh
yeah	...	I
so	the	you <sup>(6)</sup>

# Results

Spoken BNC2014	TV Corpus (IE/UK)	Corpus of British Fiction
Uh-huh (.)/(...)/?/insert : 45 Uh-huh, ...: 0 Other: 155*	Uh-huh./?! : 181 Uh-huh, ...: 11 Other: 8	Uh-huh./?! : 137 Uh-huh, ...: 53 Other: 10
Non-committal: 17 Assent/Agreement: 47 Backchannel: 120* Other: 16	Non-committal: 89 Assent/Agreement: 62 Backchannel (interviews): 16 Other: 33 (Uh-huh? : 22)**	Non-committal: 90 Assent/Agreement: 71 Backchannel (phone): 17 Other: 22 (Uh-huh? : 14)**

The first row shows instances where *uh-huh* is marked as a separate clause or unit by a punctuation mark or a pause. Or, in the case of BNC, is followed by another insert, *erm*, *oh*, *mm*, etc. (freq.: 45, 181, 137)

The second, where it starts a sentence, is followed by a comma and more text (freq.: 0, 11, 53).

\* The 'other' category is the dominant one in the BNC material, occurring infrequently in the other two (155, 8, 10). This is where the speaker goes on after the listener has uttered *uh-huh*.

\* Instances labelled backchannels (= 'other') dominate the BNC material and occur in specific situations only in the other two.

\*\* When *uh-huh* is followed by a question mark, it indicates that the speaker wants more information, e.g. "Uh-huh? And who buys him his booze? You?" (GavLya2.52089981) (Note that this has the person uttering *uh-huh* continuing their turn.)

# Examples

- Not in a frock? - Not when I saw him. - Uh-huh. Then you saw this other man. - Yeah, a German. (*non-committal (backchannel?)*)
- Bought some flowers? - Uh-huh. - I thought you'd borrowed them. I remember thinking that I'd never seen second-hand tulips before. (*assent/agreement = yes/yeah*)

"My secretary tells me you refused her your name. Would you like to tell me what it is?" "Porter. I'm Barbara Porter."  
"Uh-huh. Well now Mrs. Porter, what can I do for you?" (non-committal = ok, alright ...)  
I had the whole thing planned, you know." "You did, did you?" "Uh-huh. Yeah," she mused. "I'd say you were pretty easy." (*assent/agreement*)

S0590: >>yeah has that been to Tokyo or --UNCLEARWORD ? (>> = *overlap*)

S0616: >>well

S0590: yeah

S0616: I went I went we went to Tokyo with er the opera company

S0590: **uhu** (*backchannel*)

S0616: er but we had a bit of time off so I thought well I 'm not hanging around in Tokyo I cos I 'd been before and I 'd seen quite a lot of it so

S0590: mm

S0616: I I got on the Shinkansen and then

S0590: >>right

# Summing up / Tentative conclusions

In dialogue in modern fiction, *uh-huh* usually expresses assent or agreement with meaning close to *yeah/yes*, especially when it comes after punctuation marks or there are other clues in the text, e.g. when followed by *yeah*, nods, etc.

In some cases, *uh-huh* will carry a strong(er) air of non-committal in fiction. Clues about this can sometimes be found in the text (e.g. author adds "being a bit noncommittal" or "he said indifferently").

Fiction and TV transcripts contain passages with telephone conversations where we only «hear» one side of the conversation, and where the respondent/listener/speaker encourages the person on the other end, the narrator, to go on by repeatedly uttering *uh-huh*. This I have interpreted as instances of backchannelling.

In conversation and in interview situations, where one person is explaining something/telling a story (personal narrative/relaying an anecdote, etc.) to another person, *uh-huh* is mostly used as a backchannel by the listener, especially if they are eager to extract the story/anecdote, etc. and/or want to hear more and do not want to interrupt / confuse the speaker by adding a more specific backchannel (*wow, oh, really*, and so on). (Cf. travel shows/series on TV). Unsure if it makes sense to try and distinguish backchannelling from a non-committal response in conversation.

In TV series (and fictional dialogue) there is a mix of *uh-huh* being used as a (positive) response form and instances where the uttering of *uh-huh* indicates distractedness; one is not really paying (100%) attention to what is being said. This creates an atmosphere of tension (uncertainty, insecurity, insincerity) among the characters (and audience).

From reddit (<https://www.reddit.com/r/SuccessionTV/comments/10w84po/uhhuh/?rdt=51999>):

**what does this phrase mean as used on the show? used by Logan, sibs, Rhea, [...]**

- Seems to me that the writers rely on it in such a wide array of circumstances that it has to play a big role in creating the show's vocabulary
- It means "I heard what you said, I acknowledge it, but continue talking, you haven't sold me" a lot of the time. It comes from Logan and it's his way of sounding reassuring but actually not making a value judgement whatsoever on what is said. Said in a sarcastic tone a lot.
- The characters also say "uh huh" or similarly generic phrases of acknowledgment when they're on the phone. Probably because they don't want others to know what they're discussing.
- It means "I'm listening, but I'm not going to tell you my opinion until you give me more information"
- Logan often uses it because he's not really listening, too. It's a really versatile sound!
- In agreement with what others have said, I would add that it's also used as a "uh huh, yeah, bullshit". The Roy's pride themselves and being bullshitters, living in a world of more bullshitters. As a wise lady once said, you can't bullshit a bullshitter.
- At almost every instance, the character says "uh huh" like "yeah yeah, keep talking. I don't buy it", and they continue to look in another direction.
- It can mean a variety of things, from being unconvinced to disappointment to lacking confidence. Typically expressing dissatisfaction in some way or another, I'd say, in a highly noncommittal way.
- There's a very funny instance of this "uh huh" between Greg and Kenny at some point. I think it was in S2E10 before boarding the boat but not sure. Greg replies "uh huh" to something and Ken says "uh huh? Just uh huh? I feel like it's a little more than uh huh."

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