

A STUDY OF INTERJECTIONS

By

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0. It is important that the linguistic differences be observed primarily within the repertoire of English used in everyday life, and that our attention be divided fairly evenly between spoken and written language—although the former is largely neglected by linguists. Crystal and Davy (1969) state, in their discussion of stylistics, that :

There is thus a strong case for saying that this lack of (primarily linguistic) understanding is an important gap in a general education, and should be remedied, particularly in those cases where the gap is at all wide, and where a person has a minimal amount of linguistic adaptability.

The foreign learner of English is one of those most at a loss in this matter. He too needs to be made aware of the difference between common and rare types of language behaviour, and of the alternatives available in particular situation ; he too needs to react appropriately to language, if he wants to be accepted—and the same applies to the native speaker of English when he learns another language. The extra difficulty for the foreigner, however, is that he has no intuitive sense of linguistic appropriateness in English at all : he has no awareness of conventions of conformity, because he has not grown up in the relevant linguistic climate. He knows only what he has been taught in language lessons. Hence it is important that the syllabus for foreign language teaching should be so ordered that it includes instruction in those varieties of English that he will be likely to meet and need most frequently. (Crystal and Davy 1969 : 6–7)

In point of appropriate language use, we have to investigate the linguistic and socio-linguistic rules of interjections. Interjections have often been considered meaningless hesitation-markers. Sociological information that affects the linguistic form of an utterance has slipped out of the hands of transformational grammarians as performance facts, therefore being undecipherable. This tendency is noticed by Crystal (1979 : 153ff) and Svartvik (1979 : 167).

Catford (1964) calls our attention, stating that :

The student is still left to 'pick up' some features of English without the aid of specific instruction or drill. The so-called 'interjections' are a case in point. I know of no practical English grammar for foreign learners which describes the use of *oh*, *ah*, or the introductory or resumptive *well*. And yet the occurrences of these words, like the occurrences of all linguistic items, are not random : they are systematic and presumably describable. Compare, for instance, the use of *oh* and *ah* in the following piece of conversation, noting at the same time the accompanying differences of stress and intonation :

(a) Is that your hat? No. Oh, I thought it WAS.

(b) Is that your hat? Yes. Ah, I THOUGHT it was.

Or consider the following, which could be an extract from a story :

(a) Now, this man, his name was—*oh*, Johnson or something like that.

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(b) Now, this man, his name was—*ah*, Johnson, that was it.

(c) Now, this man, his name was—*well*, Johnson, let's say. That's as good a name as any.
In these examples, *oh*, *ah*, and *well* are not interchangeable in a random way.

1. *ah* and *oh*

James (1972) tried to show that the meaning of the rest of the sentence governs whether the speaker can use these interjections. They perform specific functions and affect meaning in predictable ways.

(1) *Ah*, *Newsweek* reports that Kissinger is a vegetarian.

The "ah" in (1) might be commenting on either the main or the subordinate clause of the sentence (i. e. embedded sentence). Therefore one of the two interpretations is, roughly :

(1') "I have just found out that, and it is significant that, *Newsweek* reports that Kissinger is a vegetarian."

The speaker may even know of a fact that Kissinger is not a vegetarian ; but he feels it is significant that *Newsweek* reports it. The other interpretation is :

(1'') "I have just found out that, and it is significant that, Kissinger is a vegetarian."

The speaker accepts *Newsweek* as a reliable authority, and is primarily interested in the information, which he accepts more or less as a fact, that Kissinger is a vegetarian. This information might be important to him because, for example, he has invited Kissinger to dinner and is concerned about what to give him to eat.

When a sentence is embedded in an island (Ross 1967), it seems that it cannot embody the main piece of information the speaker is interested in conveying. Since "ah" functions significantly in picking out and commenting on the main piece of information, it cannot refer to a sentence within an island.

(2) *Ah*, that Kissinger is a vegetarian is reported by *Newsweek*.
can only mean,

(2') It is significant that *Newsweek* reports that Kissinger is a vegetarian.

When we examine a lexical definition of "ah", we only find that it is

an exclamation of pain, sorrow, regret, pity, admiration, surprise, joy, dislike, or contempt.
The meaning of *ah* varies according to the way it is spoken. (WBD)

James (1972) defines "ah" as :

"I have just discovered that S and it is significant that S."

Compare :

(3) *Oh*, you're leaving tomorrow!

(4) *Ah*, you are leaving tomorrow!

(3) can either be a statement (and "oh" indicates that the speaker has just found out that the addressee is leaving, and perhaps is surprised) ; or it can be an order (and "oh" indicates that the speaker has only just remembered to tell the addressee that he is to leave tomorrow).

(4) means something similar to the former case (i. e. statement) and "ah" indicates that the speaker has just found out that the addressee is leaving ; but moreover, "ah" indicates either that

(4') the speaker thinks it is good that the addressee is leaving,
or, at any rate, that

(4'') the speaker thinks the information is significant for some reason (for example, it

might explain some recent unusual behavior on the addressee's part).
My research has revealed the following responses :¹⁾

<i>oh</i>	<i>meaning</i>	<i>frequency of response</i>
	unexpected surprise	28
	a new fact is shown	7
	regret on the part of the speaker	3
	disappointment	2
	negative attitude on the part of the speaker	2
	inherent question	1
	matter-of-factness	1
<i>ah</i>	<i>meaning</i>	<i>frequency of response</i>
	acknowledgement of a fact already known but just remembered ²⁾	14
	understanding and compliance	7
	relief on the part of the speaker	7
	regret on the part of the speaker	7
	excitement on the part of the speaker	2
	delight on the part of the speaker	2

"oh" occurs with an (quasi-) imperative :

- (5) "How about if we have Karl shoot them climbing the fence?" "Oh, come on, Shriff," she said irritably. (CA#4, 123)
 (6) "Oh, excuse me," Sabrina said. (CA#3, 141)
 (7) "Oh, let's go," Janey whined. (Runs, 14)

The meaning of acknowledgement of a fact already known but just remembered in the use of "ah" is significant in the following examples :

- (8) They stopped before the desk, and the brisk young man behind it said, "Yes, ladies?" "Reservation for three in the name of Kelly Garrett," said Kelly. "Ah, yes, Miss Garrett. Welcome to the Mountain Tarn." (CA#3, 16)
 (9) "To you, Chérie," he said, his eyes turning me into melted butter, "and the continued success of your Portland Squirrels." "Beavers," I said with giggle. "Ah, yes." He flashed his exquisite teeth at me. "Beavers!" (Southpaw, 155)
 (10) "Are you Mr. John Smith?"... "Ah—John Smith—yes. I am your tenant, John Smith." (CA#3, 136)

Lexical definitions of "oh" are :

1. a word used before a person's name in beginning to speak : *Oh Mary, look!*³⁾
2. a word used to express surprise, joy, grief, pain, and other feelings : *Oh, dear me!*
Oh! that hurts! Oh! what a pity! (WBD)

"oh" does not seem to function merely as an attention-getter. It seems to be combined with emotional shades of the second definition. Also, it seems to moderate the abruptness of addressing by the addressee's name.

- (11) "Oh, Kelly," Sabrina said with a pained expression on her face. (CA#3, 47)
 (12) "...you're already a beauty ; you don't have to do things to yourself." "Oh, Mom!" (Runs, 20)
 (13) "Oh, Dad! He may not be much, but he isn't a criminal." (Runs, 12)

"oh" sometimes occur with an address word in phatic communion :

- (14) Glancing up, the pudgy man said, "Joan's on a coffee br—" He paused abruptly as

his visitor's beauty registered on him. "Oh, hi," he said. (CA#3, 72)

(15) "Dan Winston, Bosley." "Oh, hello. How are things going?" (CA#4, 104)

The speaker picks up part or whole of the addressee's utterance, and expresses his own interpretation, bringing it into focus by "oh" as a kind of marker.

(16) "What are you wearing, Leroy?" ... "Oh, those. Yeah, well, they helps me get around, ..." (Fame, 148)

Syntactically orthographically, "oh" shows the following distinctive meaning :

(i) *Doubt and surprise*. Similar expression is "Really?"

(17) "...See you in the morning." "No, you won't. You're goin' to New Orleans," "Oh?" (CA#4, 8)

(18) "Morning, Mr. Starsky. I think I have resolved the contract matter so that you won't have to worry about any more assassination attempts." "Oh? How?" (S&H, 120)

(19) "Manny flew to South America this morning," Tallman said smoothly. "Oh? What flight?" (S&H, 121)

(20) "The warden tells me you recently had an escape." "Yes," the blonde amazon said. "A girl from my barracks." "Oh? How'd she do it?" (CA#4, 40)

(21) "That's a disgusting thing to say, Kathy," Janey said angrily. "Oh, is it?" (Runs, 119)

"Oh, yes?" type is conspicuous :

(22) "This is Henry Steele, our little oil well from Texas, Brother Bell," announced the basketball coach. "Oh, yes?" Bell looked Henry up and down. (One, 103)

(23) "Your values are all wrong, Larry..." "Oh, yeah? How do you figure that?..." (Runs, 63)

(ii) *Surprise*. It often occurs with other types of interjection :

(24) Her hand slipped down, explored his crotch. "Oh!" said Henry. (One, 134)

(25) It (i. e. pickup truck) was ancient, rusted—and up on blocks. The wheels were nowhere in sight. "Oh, terrific," Jill said with disgust. (CA#4, 139)

(26) "Oh, my God," Kathy suddenly yelled. "There's a police car stopping here!" (Runs, 152)

(27) "This is Henry Steele, Miss Hays," he said when Janet answered the phone. "Oh, my. Aren't we formal. You may call me Janet, Henry." (One, 126)

(28) Henry's eyes grew brighter with recognition. "Oh, my gosh, wow! You're—" (One, 54)

(29) "Oh, Jesus!" said Henry hoarsely. (One, 135)

(30) "Oh, shit, Henry!" (One, 187)

(31) Janey was walking around the apartment, a thick book on her head, when her mother let herself in. ... "Put it back in the kitchen when you're done," Betty said wearily. "Oh, boy!" (Runs, 33)⁴

N. B. *Oh boy!* has two types of intonation. A rising intonation indicates pleasure, while a falling intonation indicates annoyance. The expression is used by both sexes. "oh+how-exclamatory" is typically used by women :

Oh how lovely!

Oh how wonderful!

(Kurokawa and Hirai 1977)

Sometimes the following orthographic technique is found :

(32) *Ohhhh, God!* he croaked. (One, 135)

(33) "*OH, CRUD!!!*" he screamed. (One, 135)

In many cases, "oh" occurs with : (a) *yes, yeah, sure*, etc., (b) *no*, (c) sentence. Here the speaker's attitude or response to the foregoing utterance by the other person is clarified.

- (34) "...I run, and I noticed that you're wearing running shoes." "Oh, yes, I do jog."
(Runs, 116)
- (35) "It's Betty, Dad," she had crooned softly. "Of, yes," he responded weakly. "Nice of you to come." (Runs, 47)
- (36) She hugged and kissed him. "You promise?" *Oh, yes'm.*" (One, 39)
- (37) After examining her curiously, Kelly asked, "Hey, you okay?" "Oh, yes," Linda said quickly. (CA#4, 86)
- (38) "We're glad to see you, too, Ma," said Henry. He looked at his father. "Oh, yeah. Me, too," barked Jerome. (One, 76)
- (39) "I wanna compare it to a letter I just got." "Oh. Sure. I'll get it." (One, 69)
- (40) "You see his movies?" "Oh, sure," she lied. (Fame, 235)
- (41) B. J. gulped her drink. "I need a refill. Can I get you a drink?" "Oh, no, thank you." (One, 133)
- (42) "You plan to dump the professor and Rabitch out there too?" Kelly asked. "Oh, no. Quite different plans for them..." (CA#3, 112)
- (43) "You check. It's for seventy dollars." "Oh. Last week it was for fifty-six." (One, 122)
- (44) "He's gay," Betty told Holly. "Oh, that's too bad," Holly said. (Runs, 117)
- (45) "Where's Janey..." Betty called. "Oh, she's on the phone with Alice." (Runs, 29)
- (46) "You have no rehabilitation program at all, then?" Kelly asked. "Oh, we do what we can without funds. ..." (CA#4, 37)

The mere occurrence of "oh" indicates that the speaker shows his acceptance of what the other person has said, with surprise or apology or regret, etc., the interpretation of which being context-dependent.

- (47) "It's a private matter, Jill." "Oh." Jill threw an apologetic smile at the tennis pro. (CA#3, 45)
- (48) "You heard not what I said when in I came? You forgot give me money." "Oh." The fat man took out a wallet and handed him a ten. (CA#3, 135)
- (49) "What are you workin' on there?" he asked. "Term paper. For a senior psych course." "Oh." (One, 106)

2. Filled pause

This is usually written *ah* or *uh* or *um*, and employed by speakers when they have lost their places, can't find a word, are momentarily distracted, or otherwise find they are departing from fluently sustained speech (Goffman 1978). As Goffman (1978) states, in some English speaking circles the familiar hesitation markers are systematically employed in slightly different ways, so that, for example :

uh might be heard when the speaker had forgotten a proper name,

oh when he knew a series of facts but was trying to decide which of them could be appropriately cited or best described for the hearers.

"uh" [ə :] expresses hesitation, or pause. The speaker is at a loss for an appropriate word to start his utterance, or sometimes he finds, for a moment, himself in midway as he has lost an appropriate word. It occurs either in front-position or in mid-position.

- (1) "Uh, Dad—is Ma there?" (One, 122)

- (2) "Sir?" called Henry. "What?" "Uh, where do I pick up my paycheck?" (One, 96)
- (3) "What's your name," asked Mr. Farrell. "Ralph Garcy. Uh—Raul Garcia." (Fame, 43)
- (4) "Uh...clams sound good," she said lamely. (Fame, 207)
- (5) "Uh, where's the crew?" (Fame, 235)
- (6) "Can I get you a beer?" "Uh, no thanks," said Coco nervously. (Fame, 236)
- (7) "Uh..." "What, J'rome?" (One, 81)
- (8) "Is, uh, Janet Hays there?" (One, 97)
- (9) "Oh, no, Ma. I, uh—just wanted to hear your voice." (One 122)
- (10) "Don't your...uh...feminine attributes get in the way when you're pitching?" the AP writer said. (Southpaw, 42)
- (11) "Now what the crud does a...uh...Kafkaesque whatever-you-said mean?" he asked. (One, 48)

We find the following orthographic technique :

- (12) "Why don't you go next door and let Mrs. Shine audition you?"... "Uhhhh, sure ting." (Fame, 34)

Other orthographic variants are "er", and very rare "ah" : 5)

- (13) Gazing at her wide-eyed, the girl said, "Mary." "Mary—er...?" (CA#3, 123)
- (14) After a time she said slowly, "Well, I had an aunt—er—her name was..." (CA#3, 123)
- (15) "Er...excuse me, miss, you don't need his name he's not here for an audition he's my partner see..." (Fame, 24)
- (16) "What did he play?" Shorofsky asked dryly. "Er..." Ralph tried to think of a symphony instrument. (Fame, 32)
- (17) "Car is parked far side of vacant cottage. Will move it somewhere else after the—ah..." (CA#3, 113)

3. *uh-huh* and *uh-uh*

Trager (1958) observes these expressions phonetically :

The usual *uh-uh* of negation has higher vowel-like resonance, with internal (and often initial) glottal closure ; it may or may not be accompanied by closed-lip or open-lip nasalization. The *uh-huh* of affirmation is just like the negation except for glottal continuant internally instead of glottal closure.

- (1) "You actually got to see the professor?" Kelly asked in surprise. "Uh-huh. And he put me in my proper place." (CA#3, 52)
- (2) "You put it there, Charlie?" "Uh-huh. It was an accident." (CA#3, 60)
- (3) "My father. He's in Spain right now making Italian Westerns." Uh-huh, thought Farrell. (Fame, 43)
- (4) "So, I guess I was stupid to get so upset over Michael Lambert. He's him, I'm me, and we just don't have the same things to offer." "Uh-huh," Montgomery agreed. (Fame, 211)

However, we find very few examples of written "uh-uh" :

- (5) "You're kidding." Tom stared at him. "You don't know what you smell." "Uh-uh." "It's leaves, all right. The kind of leaves that make you feel you're Kareem Abdul Jabbar and Dr. J., all at the same time." (One, 132)

See the next section. We have also the following variant :

(7) Student : O. K. I'll call him back later. Thank you.

Secretary : *Mm-hmm*. Goodbye.

Student : Goodbye.

(Kettering 1975 : 10)

Also, see Flexner (1976 : 189, 459), in which variants of affirmative and negative answers are discussed.

4. *oh*, *oh* and *oh-oh*

The meaning of *oh*, *oh* was already discussed in Yamada (1976).

To quote Dwight Bolinger (Personal communication, July 12, 1976) : ⁶⁾

uh-uh (ʌʔʌ) with or without initial [h] and with or without nasalization = more or less simple negation. The neutral vowel seems to make it negation and nothing else. The spellings are variously *uh-uh*, *huh-uh*, *hunh-uh*. To be distinguished from *uh-huh* and *unh-huh*, which have no glottal catch and are 'affirmation.'

oh-oh (oʔo) = negation coupled with surprise. For example, if I were with a companion and we both had entered a temple where we were supposed to walk without shoes, and my companion noticed that I was walking with my shoes on, he might say, "*Oh-oh*, you have your shoes on ; better go back and take them off." Or if I noticed someone coming whom I did not want to meet, I might say to you, "*Oh-oh*, look who's coming ; let's cross to the other side of the street."

uh-oh (ʌʔo) = warning (to oneself or someone else) to watch one's step, not to make a mistake. **oh-uh* is not used. (oʔo, aʔa, aʔa, æʔæ), a gradient of vowel sounds plus glottal catch ; the vowel may be at any position from mid-back rounded to mid-front rounded. All couple negation with warning, and the farther front the vowel is, the sharper the warning is. These forms do not have conventional spellings. All these expressions commonly have a stepwise intonation—two levels, with the first higher than the second ; the farther apart in pitch, the more relaxed. But the two syllables may also be at the same level, and the last set (the ones without conventional spellings), may even have the second syllable a bit higher than the first, and again, the higher the second syllable, the sharper the warning.

(1) The car accelerated. To fifty. "*Oh, oh*, Jesus!" he said. (One, 135)

(2) "Charlie wants you to look so totally different from your usual appearances that if you are later seen by those you interview, they will be no chance of recognition." "*Oh, oh*," Sabrina said. (CA#4, 35)

(3) Billie said, "*Oh, oh*, here comes the moose." They all turned to glance in the direction Billie was looking, toward the frontdoor. The burly Maxine was striding their way up the central aisle. (CA#4, 80)

5. *hum*, *hm*, *um*

Suzuki (1977) discusses the following variants, stating that :

The hum...may not necessarily be a phoneme but it is an organically separate part of the language to the extent that its usage by Americans is fairly widespread.

Some examples of expressions in the lexeme paradigm [hm:]

1. [h^hm:]?

gloss

What?

2. [h^hm:]

Odd...

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 3. [h̥m̥'] (grunted out) | You don't say... |
| 4. [h̥m̥']...[h̥m̥']...[h̥m̥'] | Yeah...yeah...yeah ⁷ |
| 5. [h̥m̥:]...[h̥m̥:] | Uh-huh |
| 6. [h̥m̥:]...[h̥m̥:] | O. K. |
| 7. [h̥m̥:]...[h̥m̥:]? | O. K. ? |

(1) "Mom?" she began. "Hmmmm?" (Runs, 123)

(2) He wants to play for our clothes. Isn't he sweet? *Hmmmmmmmm*. Is that all you've got to say? *Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm*. (Southpaw, 133)

(3) "You just got to try one of these, with butter, lots of butter." "No thanks. Harry?" "Um?" "Print it." (Jaws 2, 158)

(4) "Mike?" "Um?" (Jaws 2, 105)

In the following example, "um" functions like "uh", filled pause :

(5) "Hey, man," he said. "Um, would you do me and Tom a favor?" (One, 133)

N. B. Written forms of interjections are not necessarily consistent.

A lower-middle-class adolescent girl sitting with four friends at a table in a crowded crêperie is brought her order, a large crêpe covered with ice cream and nuts. As the dish is set before her, she is transfixed for a moment, and wonder and pleasure escape with an Oooooo! In a casino an elderly woman playing the slots alongside two friends hits a twenty-dollar payoff, and above the sound of silver dropping in her tray peeps out a Wheee! (Goffman 1978)

Cf. She was so engrossed in her transformation that she didn't hear a hissing noise coming from behind the racks of costumes. "Psst. Psssttt!" (Fame, 138)

6. *wow* [wáu]

This is an expression of surprise and admiration, and is used informally in American English. It sometimes co-occurs with "oh", although "oh" itself expresses surprise, therefore the meaning of surprise is expressed twofold.

(1) Mike shrugged : "Tried out my suit, this morning." "Keep you warm?" Mike's eyes shifted : "Fantastic." "Nice to get back in the ocean?" Brody's voice tailed off. These were grounds full of land mines, and he really did not know what to say. "Oh, *wow*! Yeah!" (Jaws 2, 90)

(2) Girl relief pitcher! *Oh, wow*! (Southpaw, 130)

(3) I made a mock salute as he left with Mary Lee. Birth-control pills. *Oh, wow*! Throwing games? For a lover? (Southpaw, 100)

N. B. Interestingly, there are some cries which seem to occur more commonly in our response to another's fate as it is recounted to us (good or bad), than they do in our response to our own. *Oh, wow*! is an example. (Goffman 1978)

"wow" is sometimes followed by an exclamatory sentence or by a question or by a statement, which paraphrases the content of the meaning of surprise or admiration.

(4) "*Wow*, what a put-down!" Kathy responded. (Runs, 64)

(5) In the elevator, Henry said, "*Wow*! nineteenth floor! They sure live up high." (One, 131)

(6) "...I've been teaching kids for seventeen years..." "*Wow*, has it been that long?" (Runs, 105)

(7) And when the hell are they going to let me know? *Wow*, do I really have to wait until next September to start? (Fame, 52)

(8) "Wow! That's an interesting thought. And he looked in on us at the dinner."
(CA#4, 54)

(9) "Wow!" Kathy exclaimed. "I can smell your breath all the way over here, Janey. You been drinking cologne?" (Runs, 99)

The following example is an interesting one, in which the expression is used as a noun equivalent :

(10) The man whose smile greeted me was too good to be true—or is it too true to be good? "Jeri, Chérie," he said, rhyming the two words as Chevalier might have, "at last we are together. You do not know how I have looked forward to this occasion. You cannot know." Oh, God, is he *oh wow wow!* (Southpaw, 154)

7. *ouch*

The "pain cry" is *ouch!* or *oww!* This expression is probably from Pennsylvania German *autsch*.

(1) In the kitchen, Betty still wore running togs, not recommended for torrid interiors. As she rushed through dinner preparations she touched a hot pan on the stove. "Ouch!" She put the finger to her mouth and left the kitchen; left the string beans to saute on their own; left the steak to sizzle and hiss; left the potatoes to crack their skins open in violently boiling water; left it all with her finger in the mouth. (Runs, 98)

(2) She tripped and fell... Betty held her leg, wincing with pain; she had a raw, bleeding bruise on her knee. ... "Are you all right?" Kathy asked, concerned. "Ouch!" Betty looked up, a grimace on her face changing to a smile. (Runs, 165)

N. B. Ensclosed in a dentist's chair, we use a pain cry as a warning that the drill has begun to hurt. Or when a finger is firmly held by a nurse, we *ouch* when the needle probing for a silver goes too deep. Plainly the cry in these cases can serve as a self-regulated indicator of what is happening, providing a reading for the instigator of the pain, who might not otherwise have access to the information needed. The meaning, then, may not be "I have been hurt," but rather, "You are just now coming to hurt me." ... these are good examples of how closely a vocalization can collaborate with another person in the situation. (Goffman 1978)

Also, see Bolinger (1980).

N. B. Nonwords can't quite be called part of a language, since, for example, there tends to be no canonical "correct" spelling. However, Quine (1959 : 6) states :

'Ouch' is not independent of social training.

One need only to prick a forefinger to appreciate that it is an English word.

8. *oops*

Goffman (1978) includes the expression in the category of 'spill cry', stating :

This time the central examples, *Oops!* and *Whoops!*, are well-formed sounds, although not in every sense words, and again something as much (perhaps even more) the practice of females as males.

(1) ... the elderly man's bowl slid off the saucer to upend on the tablecloth in front of him. "Oops!" Sabrina said. "Sorry about that." (CA#3, 128)

(2) "How's the floor, Doris? Who's the lucky fellah? Well, what do you know?"

Somebody finally gave it to old Finsecker. It can't be Gloria here, he's not into chicks." Casting a sly glance at Doris, who was looking puzzled, Ralph clapped one hand over his mouth. "OOOps, shut mah mouth." (Fame, 89)

As Goffman (1978) observes :

... the expression is presumably used for *minor* failings of environmental control, and so in the face of a more serious failure, the *Oops!* has the effect of downplaying import and hence implication as evidence of our incompetence, (It follows that to show we take a mishap *very* seriously we might feel constrained to omit the cry.)⁸⁾

Lexical definition is : "Used typically to express mild apology, surprise, or dismay (as when one drops an object or makes a faux pas)" (*Web*⁸⁾, but it also can provide a warning to others present that a piece of the world has gotten loose and that they might best be advised to take care. Etymologically, the origin cannot be identified, but Ciardi (1980) says :

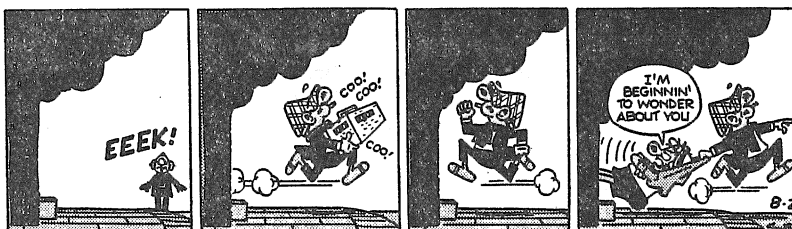
Though as native as any language form in English, *oop/oops* does not appear in most Am.-Eng. dictionaries. As conjecture only, since no evidence is available. I take the *oop* to be a reflex inhalation, the *s* to be the beginning of a bitten-off "sorry," for one often hears "Oop—sorry" and even "Oop—so'."

- N. B. Thus a woman, rapidly walking to a museum exit, passes the door, catches her mistake, utters *Oops!* and backtracks to the right place. A man, dropping a piece of meat through the grill to coals below, utters *Oops!* and then spears the meat to safety with his grill fork. (Goffman 1978)
- N. B. Note, when we utter *Oops!* as we slip on the ice, we can be making a plea to the closest other for a steadying hand and simultaneously warning others as to what they themselves should watch out for, these circumstances surely opening up our surround for vocalizations. When in fact there is no danger to the self, we may respond to another's momentary loss of control with an *Oops!* also, providing him a warning that he is in trouble, a readied framework within which he can define the mishap, and a collectively established cadence for his anticipated response. (Goffman 1978)
- N. B. *Oopsadaisy!* ...when a parent plucks up a toddler and rapidly shifts it from point to another or "playfully" swings or tosses it in the air, the prime mover may utter an *Oopsadaisy!*, stretched out to cover the child's period of groundlessness, counteracting its feeling of being out of control, and at the same time instructing the child in the terminology and role of spill cries. (Goffman 1978)

9. *EEK*

Goffman's "threat startle" includes "Eek!" an "Yipe!" (Goffman 1978). Surprise and fear that are very much under control are expressed. We find no entry of the expression in dictionaries, except that *Kenkyusha's New English-Japanese Dictionary* (1980⁸⁾ includes and defines it as an Americanism that expresses surprise, etc.

ANDY CAPP—By Reg Smythe



NOTES

1) The research was conducted on August 12, 1981. The subjects were : 45 American students from all over the country ; 19 males and 25 females ; 5 graduate students, 12 seniors, 15 juniors, 9 sophomores, and 3 freshmen. They were the American delegation of the 33rd Japan–America Student Conference.

2) It almost means : “Oh, yes. I remember now—perhaps you told me earlier that you will be leaving tomorrow.” The expression conspicuously occurs with a gesture of lifting one’s right hand with one finger in the air.

Only one person responded that he finds no distinctive difference between “oh” and “ah”.

3) *CULD*’s definition is better : “used when speaking to a person or attracting his attention : *Oh, John, will you come into my room, please?*”

4) “boy” itself is used as an infomal interrjection, especially in American English, by both sexes :

Speaking in a whisper, Kelly said, “There are girls who get a thousand a week for this. Also whispering, Jill said, “*Boy*, if this is how it starts, I’m sure worried about how it ends.” (CA#4, 75)

5) “Car is parked far side of vacant cottage. Will move it somewhere else after the—*ah* . . . (CA#3, 113)

6) Also see Bolinger (1975 : 39 ; 1980 : 11). It is very interesting to notice that Dwight Bolinger changed his description of “oh-oh!” (meaning ‘look out, you’re about to make a mistake’) in Bolinger (1968 : 23) into “uh-oh!” in Bolinger (1975 : 39). He answered to me, saying : “As to why I made the change, I believe it was because one of the readers whom the publisher engaged to criticize the manuscript felt that *uh-oh* was closer to the meaning that I had given.” (Personal communication, July 12, 1976)

7) “. . . is used to let the speaker know that the listener is following intently the conversation (i. e., this is by way of being polite to the speaker).” (Suzuki 1977 : 423)

8) “Hence, used for comic effect in reaction to a major mischief, as when the mad scientist, in advertently touching off the Omega bomb, says, ‘Oops!’” (Ciardi 1980)

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Appendix

<falling intonation>

	+lexical meaning	-lexical meaning
Meaning \ Degree	Strong ← ———→ Weak	Strong ← ———→ Weak
Affirmation	\ Yes ← \ Yeah —————→	^ Uh - huh \ Um
Approval	\ Sure Of \ course ← - Right —————→	\ Mm \ H'm
Permission/Consent	O \ kay (OK) Oh ^ yes	
Delight/Approval	(Oh) \ Great! \ Fine \ Good, etc.	'Oh (\gosh!) (\god)
Affirmation	\ Never mind It's \ okay It's \ all right	\ Oh
Surprise/Discovery/ Unexpectancy	↵ Really —————→ Is \ it You \ are	← ↵ Oh —————→
Slight nodding Fillers	↓ Let me \ see We'll \ see	^ Uh - huh \ Um / Mm \ H'm / We'll

<rising intonation>

	+lexical meaning	-lexical meaning
Meaning \ Degree	Strong ← ———→ Weak	Strong ← ———→ Weak
Interrogation	↵ Sure ?	Oh ?
Distrust	↵ Yeah ?	We'll ?
Surprise	↵ Really ?	H'm ?
Unexpectancy	Is it ?	
Confirmation	← You \ are ? —————→ (Are you) \ Sure ?	
Showing interest	↵ Yes ? / \ Yeah ? ↵ Really ? ↵ Yes ? / \ Right ? Is that \ so ? ↵ Yeah ?	
Urging/I Interest	↵ And	(Oh) \ yeah ↵ Oh ? ↵ So ?
Slight nodding		↓ Uh → huh ↓ We'll

(Cf. Sagawa 1981 : 18-19)