Jearse and *dow:* Emphatic ‘yes’ and ‘no’ in the East of England and Northeast America

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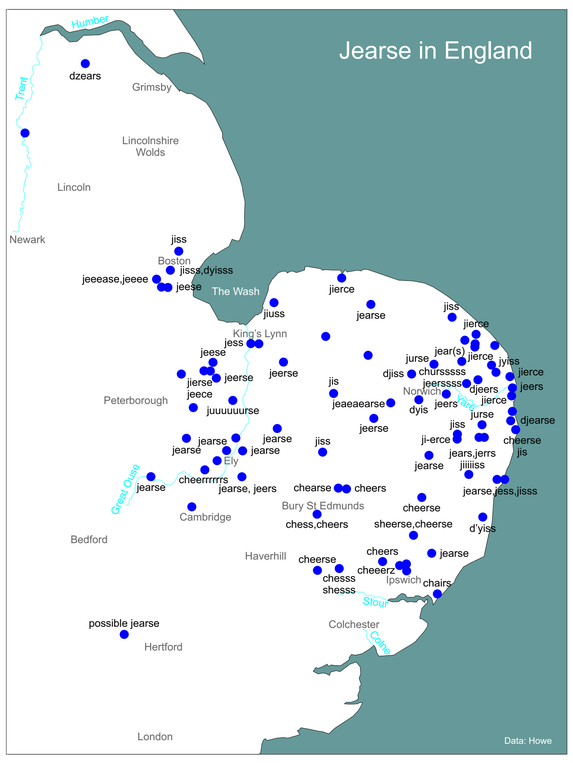

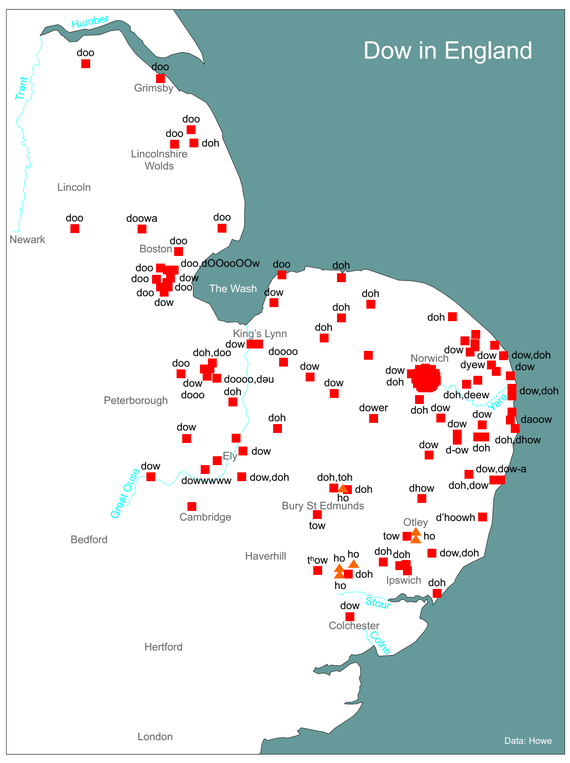

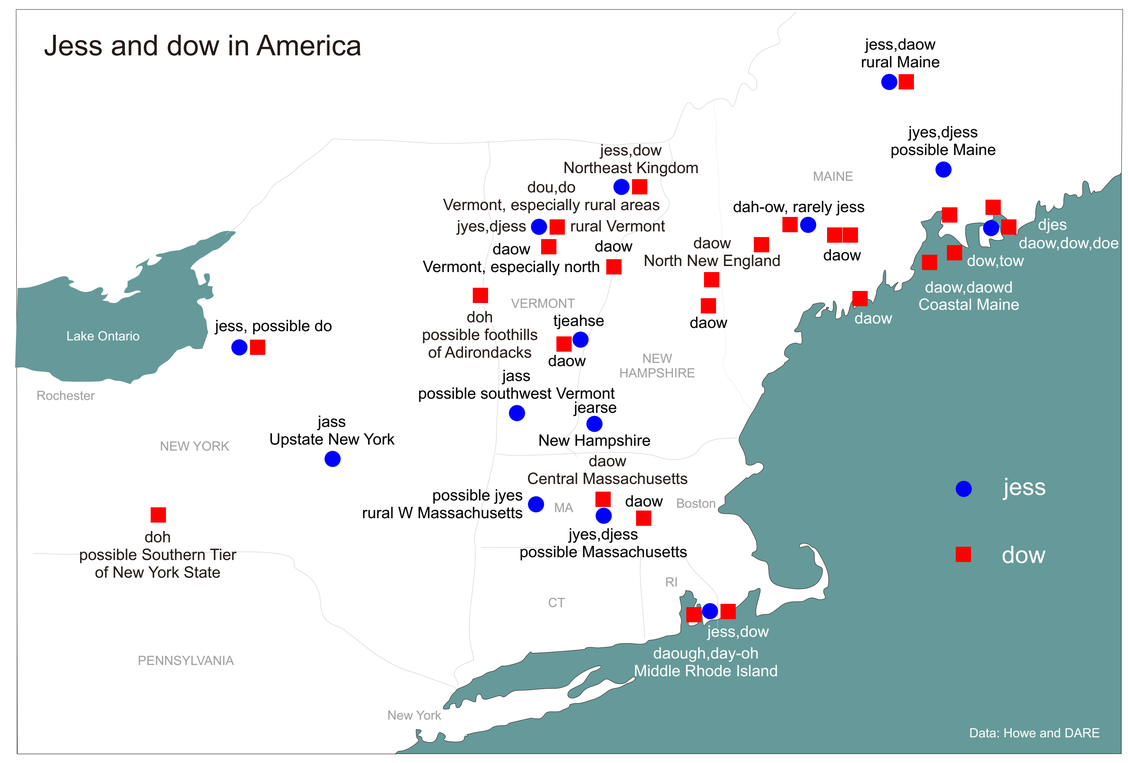

What is the origin of words for ‘yes’ and ‘no’ And why do we have so many ways of expressing ‘yes’ and ‘no’ in English? There are the standard *yes* and *no*, informal *yeah* and *nah*, and regional *aye* and *nay*. We also have political *yea* and triumphant *yay*. We can say *yep* and *nope*. We can vocalise ‘yes’ and ‘no’ as *uh huh* and *uh-uh*, and gesture them by nodding and shaking our heads. And there are significant differences between languages and cultures in what ‘yes’ and ‘no’ can signify.

1 Gesture and vocalisation

‘Yes’ and ‘no’ are extraordinary because they have paralinguistic and extralinguistic equivalents: as well as verbal *yes* and *no*, we have vocalised *uh huh* and *uh-uh* and the gestures of nodding and shaking our heads. This trimodality — language, vocalisation and gesture — of ‘yes’ and ‘no’ is quite exceptional, making them a potentially significant area of research in understanding the origins of human communication.

1.1 Gesture

So why do we nod and shake our heads to communicate ‘yes’ and ‘no’? Darwin wrote in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) on the gesture for ‘no’:

> With infants, the first act of denial consists in refusing food; and I repeatedly noticed with my own infants, that they did so by withdrawing their heads laterally from the breast … In refusing food, children frequently move their heads several times from side to side, as we do in shaking our heads in negation … the mouth is closed, so that these movements might likewise come to serve as signs of negation.

On the origin of the gesture for ‘yes’, he wrote:

> In accepting food and taking it into their mouths … [infants] incline their heads forwards.

However, Darwin realised that not all cultures gesture ‘yes’ and ‘no’ in the same way.

1.2 Vocalisation

What about vocalized ‘yes’ and ‘no’, *uh huh* and *uh-uh*? ‘Yes’ and ‘no’ combine older interjections and newer language. In the brain, there is evidence of a difference. Interjections are associated with phylogenetically ancient subcortical circuitry linked with emotion; language proper is associated with phylogenetically more recent cortical structures (Wharton 2003). This suggests that our ancestors communicated ‘yes’ or ‘no’ by vocalisation before language.

Yes and *no* have *interjectionality* – expressive vocalising and emotional emphasis are more common than in ‘normal’ words. So we can hear for example ecstatic *yes*, triumphant *yes* and agonising *no*, doubtful *yes*, dismissive *yes*, bored *yes*, sarcastic *yes*, definite *no*, angry *no* and surprised *no*, to name a few.

2 Particle + echo = *yes*

English *yea* has the same origin as German or Swedish *ja*. But *yes* is not related to any word in any other language. So where does it come from?

If your partner asks you *Don’t you love me anymore*, your answer will depend not only on your heart but also on your language. In Japanese if you are unhappy you might answer *yes*, meaning that *it’s* TRUE, *I don’t love you*. In English, on the other hand, you might answer *no*, meaning that *I do* NOT *love you*. Japanese is truth based, while English is polarity based. Thus, Japanese can reply *yes* and English *no* with the same (unhappy) meaning.

In polarity languages like English, *yes* alone in response to a negative question can be ambiguous:

> Don’t you love me anymore?
> ?Yes

Some languages have a special form of ‘yes’, such as French *si* or German *doch*, to answer a negative question in the positive. English had one too, namely *yes*.

So, the most recent explanation for the origin of *yes* (Wallage & van der Wurff 2013) is that it comes from Old English

> ‘yea’ + ‘is so’

That is, an unequivocal *yea*. Augmentation of ‘yes’ and ‘no’ particles is common, and ‘yea’ + ‘is so’ subsequently merged to form ‘yes’. Later we will see these same processes of augmentation and univerbation in the origin of *jearse* and *dow*.

2.1 Particles and echoes

‘Yea’ and ‘is so’ are what we term particles and echoes. Particles and echoes are the two main ways of answering ‘yes’ and ‘no’ in the world’s languages. For example, to the question *Will you marry me*, we can answer using a particle, *yes* or *no*. Or we can answer with the matrimonial *I do*, echoing the question:

> *Do you* take this man/woman to be
> your lawfully wedded husband/wife?
> *I do*

Often, we combine a particle and echo together, as in ‘yea’ + ‘is so’ or *Yes, I do*.

3 Interjection + particle = *aye*

Particles and echoes also help explain the origin of another common word for ‘yes’ in English, *aye*. In the SURVEY OF ENGLISH DIALECTS, carried out in the 1950s, the most widespread form for ‘yes’ was not *yea* or *yes*, but *aye*. It was used not only in the North and Midlands, but also in areas of the South of England. It is a feature of Scottish English, too, and is used in government in many English-speaking countries. There is also an *aye*-like *ayuh* in New England, familiar to readers of Stephen King.

Aye appears suddenly about 1575 and is very common around 1600. Surprisingly, it is first written *I*. For example, Shakespeare makes the following play on words in *Romeo and Juliet* (here in original spelling):

> *Hath Romeo slaine himselfe? say thou but I,*
> *And that bare vowell I shall poyson more*
> *Then the death-darting eye of Cockatrice,*
> *I am not I, if there be such an I.*
> *Or those eyes shot, that makes thee answere I:*
> *If he be slaine say I, or if not, no.*
> *Briefe, sounds, determine my weale or wo.*

So where does *aye* come from, and why was it first written *I*? To answer the first question, *aye* likely comes from an interjection + particle. As well as being interjectional, *yes* and *no* particles are often also augmented by interjections – *oh yes*, *oh no* and so on – and this was true in Shakespeare’s time, too:

> ah + yea > aye

Secondly, there was probably an overlap with the pronominal echo *I*. We can illustrate this with a simple example using Modern English:

> Do you really love me?
> Yes, I do
> Yes, I

Yes, I is a particle + echo.

We can find the pronominal echo in earlier English. For example in *The Romaunt of the Rose*:

Knowest hym ought?	*Know him at all?*
Yhe, Dame, parde!	*Yea, Lady, by God!*
Nay, nay	*Nay, nay*
Yhis, I	*Yes, I*

The pronominal echo ‘I’ could overlap with ‘yes’, meaning that ‘ah + yea’ could be interpreted as ‘I’ by speakers. Around the same time, the pronunciation of ‘I’ was changing in the Great Vowel Shift. The old form was consonantal *ich*; the new vocalic form *i* came to be pronounced *aye*, making ‘I’ and ‘aye’ homophones. This coincidental play on words with *I* may have made *aye* catchy.

4 *Jearse* and *dow*

Jearse and *dow* are special emphatic words for ‘yes’ and ‘no’. They are used like this in my home dialect:

> Di’n’t she goo to Cambridge yisty?
> *Jearse!*

> Did ’e goo to Cambridge yisty?
> *Dow!*

Jearse and *dow* are not recorded in the OED, the SURVEY OF ENGLISH DIALECTS or the ENGLISH DIALECT DICTIONARY. However, in my research I have found them in a large swathe of England from the Colne to the Humber, including Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire, Lincolnshire and part of Essex.

They are also used in New England and Northeast America. Although not recorded by the LINGUISTIC ATLAS OF NEW ENGLAND, the DICTIONARY OF AMERICAN REGIONAL ENGLISH cites *daow*, *daowd*, *dow*, *doh* or *day-oh* in Maine, Vermont, Massachusetts and Rhode Island, as well as New York State. In my survey of the US in 2015 and 2019, I have recorded *dow* and/or *jess* or variants in all states of New England (except CT) as well as New York State.

Colonists from Eastern England probably brought *dow* and *jearse* to New England in the seventeenth century; four hundred years later, this distinctive feature of Eastern English still survives.

Like *yes* and *aye*, *jearse* and *dow* most likely developed from augmentation of a particle, in this case by interjectional ‘dear’, which explains the initial dental in both forms:

> ‘dear’+ ‘yes’ > jearse
> ‘dear’+ ‘no’ > dow

The OED records constructions such as *dear bless*, *dear help* and *dear save us!* These are expressions of astonishment ‘usually implying an appeal for higher help’. *Dear* thus represents or implies a fuller *dear Lord*.

Already in Chaucer, we can find ‘yes’ and ‘no’ augmented by an oath:

> ‘Ye [= yea], holy God,’ quod she, ‘what thyng is that?’

> ‘Why, nay,’ quod he, ‘by God and by my trouthe!’

We also find *dear yes* and *dear no* in Dickens, for example *Tale of Two Cities*:

> ‘Damn it all, sir!’ said Stryver, staring at him, ‘am I not eligible?’
> ‘Oh dear yes! Yes. Oh yes, you’re eligible!’

And *David Copperfield*:

> ‘She doesn’t sing to the guitar?’ said I
> ‘Oh dear no!’ said Traddles

In Eastern English, *dear yes* and *dear no* underwent univerbation to *jearse* and *dow*.

5 *Jess* and *dow* in America

But how did *dow* and *jearse* come to America? David H. Fischer writes in *Albion’s Seed*:

> From 1629 to 1775, the present area of the United States was settled by at least four large waves of English-speaking immigrants. The first was an exodus of Puritans from the east of England to Massachusetts during a period of eleven years from 1629 to 1640.

Approximately 60% of emigrants to Massachusetts came from Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire, Lincolnshire, Bedfordshire and Kent.

In the speech of New England, we can still hear this relationship today. Gerald E. Lewis gives an example of American *daow* in *How to Talk Yankee*:

> Did you get your deer yet?
> Daow, I can’t even see one.

Below are some sample responses from my survey in the US, the first from Bar Harbor, ME:

> Definitely used them when I was a kid and into my teens. Not *daow* but more *dow* as an emphatic ‘no’.
>
> *Jearse* wasn’t what we used, but more pronounced as *djes* with a clipped ending. That was a definitely insolent ‘yes’ given when the response was so obvious that further discussion was not on the table.

From Livermore, ME:

> *Dah-ow*, two syllables; First: *dah*; second: *ow*. Dragged out for emphasis, not general[ly] used for ‘no’, but used to imply the proposition queried is preposterous. For instance,
>
> I saw Susie flirting with you
> Daow, we was just talkin

And from Hartland, VT:

> *Dow* is pronounced like a nose explosion. Usually with some degree of contempt, disgust, or emphasized negativity. Sort of like a growl!
>
> I think of it as *Tjeahse*, sort of spit out, maybe half like a sneeze. As in ‘If I say I’ll do it, I will do it.’

New England migrants and their descendants spread out from Massachusetts to southern New England, eastern New Jersey and northern New York, later migrating east and north to Maine and Canada, and west to the Pacific. Cities founded by settlers from New England include Buffalo, Cleveland, Chicago, Denver, Seattle and San Francisco. Is it possible that *jearse* and *dow* travelled that far? That is one aim of my future research.

6 Main points

- Emphatic forms of ‘yes’ and ‘no’ across wide swathe of Eastern England, New England and Northeast America
- Missed by almost all language surveys (OED, EDD, SED, LANE) but *daow* recorded by DARE
- English over a dozen forms of ‘yes’ and ‘no’
- Trimodality of ‘yes’ and ‘no’ quite exceptional and likely universal
- ‘Yes’ and ‘no’ potentially significant in understanding origins of human communication

7 Selected references

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8 Notes

Informants completed an online questionnaire. The socio-economic range was relatively wide. Approximately 60% of respondents to the UK survey were male and 40% female. The youngest was born in 1992, the oldest in 1929. US data forthcoming.

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