UNACCUSTOMED AS I, UNH ...

MAXEY BROOKE
Sweeny, Texas

Ancient calendars were based on the lunar month and the solar year. Because the solar year is not an integral multiple of the lunar month, the months tended to drift through the seasons, and before anyone quite realized it February was the first month of the year instead of March. It was embarrassing to have a spring festival in the middle of a snowstorm, so one of the functions of the high priest was to occasionally insert or intercalate an extra month into a year to bring the seasons back into synchronization.

Later, philologists borrowed the term INTERCALATION to mean the insertion of extraneous sounds or words into our speech. These sounds have also been called EMBOLALIA (from a Greek word for 'wedge' or 'stopper') and CHEVILLE (a French word for a wood plug used in carpentry). These 'ums', 'uh's' and 'ahs' account for about three per cent of recorded conversations.

During a stay in Tokyo, I noticed that the Japanese, when searching for a word, would go 'umm'. This was different from the American 'unh' or the Mexican 'eh' that I was used to, and it started me observing the intercalations of other nations. Although they are not universally used in each country, this is what I have come up with.

United States unh u as in must, no n sound
Canada uh u as in under, between US and Canada
Germany uh short e, elongated
Britain ah broad a
Northern Ireland ah a as in flat, with a slight suggestion of n; the h chopped off
Mexico eh short e, explosive
Netherlands eh short e, elongated
France eh short e, pronounced with rounded lips
Japan umm velar
Russia umm gutteral
ah about midway between Canada, Britain

So, unh, keep your ears open, you know, and, like, try to expand the, unh, list, OK?