

Maureen Lipman

Language must evolve, and fashionable slang is part of that evolution, but why is our current vernacular so very questioning? There is the ubiquitous Aussie upward inflection, a post-Neighbours given, but added to that we have hypothetical questions, bang slap in the middle of sentences, as in: “So I went up to him, right? And I said, ‘You’re that bloke from the warehouse, innit? I want a word with you, ok?’ ‘You what?’ he says, and I’m just, like, ‘Helloo?’ And he’s well miffed, know what I mean?”

It’s as though we need constant reassurance all the time from the listener that they understand us, even though we are using such clear and concise language.

My late mother was the mistress of the hypothetical question, but that was, by her own admission, because she couldn’t bear silence.

“Ooh,” she’d say, apropos of not much, “doesn’t it soon get to 10 to 10?” Or, “Ooh, aren’t eggs useful?” Or, “Ooh, doesn’t a black skirt cover a multitude of sins?”

I used to grind my teeth, knowing I was supposed to reply, “Yes, the evening has gone quickly, you’re quite right.” Or, “Eggs, yes, I know, you can bake with them, bind meatballs with them, or just cook with them.” Or, “It certainly does. I mean, if your hips are wide then the dark colour of the skirt tends to lessen the effect of the width.”

But instead I would grunt and carry on watching TV. What wouldn’t I give now to respond to those questions? A hypothetical question if ever there was one...