Ah, like this is how we, um, speak ... uh-huh

Those of us who fear overusing words such as ‘uh-huh’, ‘like’ and ‘um’ may be happy to learn these so-called ‘bad words’ are fundamental to human language.

In *How We Talk*, linguist N.J. Enfield takes a closer look at language and those bridging words we use to carry out a conversation with others.

N.J. Enfield is chair and professor of linguistics at the University of Sydney and a research associate at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in the Netherlands.

For the past decade he has worked with a large team to closely examine language across the world.

This global team recorded people’s interactions and soon discovered versions of ‘um’, ‘ah’ and ‘uh-huh’ existed in all languages.

“The first thing is they’re not rubbish words, they’re actually fundamental to our social interaction,” Prof Enfield said.

“Our assumptions about language were quickly challenged.”

Prof Enfield said researchers discovered that the rules for using these words was the same across many different languages.

“We understand better why it is that those bits of language are there,” he said.

“They’re not there because the speaker is lazy or bad mannered.

“There’s a lot of strategic reasons as to why people use them … one of them is you’re literally having trouble putting your response together.”

Interestingly, if we were able to stop using these words it would mean that we were completely fluent speakers.

“We’d be kind of like robots if we never used those terms,” Prof Enfield said.

Most people will use an ‘um’, ‘ah’, ‘like’ or ‘uh-huh’ every 60 words so it is clearly a tough habit to stop.

Prof Enfield said *How We Talk* would provide people with a stronger insight into language and why they used the words they do in conversation.