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A speech function analysis of tag questions in British English spontaneous dialogue

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Ditte Kimps *, Kristin Davidse, Bert Cornillie

Department of Linguistics, KU Leuven (University of Leuven), Blijde Inkomststraat 21, Box 3308, 3000 Leuven, Belgium

Abstract

In this article we set out to develop a comprehensive description of the speech functions of tag questions (TQs) in British English dialogue. Our first aim is to outline a descriptive framework with the relevant semantic-pragmatic and formal features to capture all the speech functions fulfilled by TQs. Critical features to the classification of TQs into speech functions are: the commodity being exchanged (information or desired action), whether the TQ realizes an A-event, B-event or AB-event, and adjacency. Features that have typical correlations with the different speech function types are: intonation, polarity, clause type of the anchor, the presence of modals, the position of TQs in adjacency pairs and turns, and responses to TQs. Our second aim is to identify and typify the wide range of speech functions that TQs can realize. It turns out that real, information-seeking questions account for only a small portion of our TQ dataset. Most TQs express statement-question blends, but they can also convey pure statements, commands and offers, and even responses to a preceding question or statement. As the quantitative instantiation of categories is an intrinsic part of a usage-based description, we will examine the relative frequencies of the various speech functions and their properties in our dataset.
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1. Introduction

In English dialogue, speakers can add tags of many kinds to their utterances: variable and non-variable, clausal and monomorphemic (Quirk et al., 1985:810–816; Huddleston and Pullum, 2002:820, 891–895; Norrick, 1995). It is generally accepted that tags signal interactional relations and interpersonal stance (e.g. McGregor, 1995, 1997; Axelsson, 2011). This article will focus on the question of how canonical interrogative tags, excluding invariant tags such as *innit*, *right*, and *eh*,[1] help express the interactional roles assumed by the speaker and expected from the hearer in dialogue (Halliday, 1994:68).

Formally, canonical English tag questions (henceforth TQs) consist of an anchor followed by an interrogative tag with the finite and subject of the tag typically agreeing with those of the anchor. The term 'tag question' will be used throughout this article to refer to the *whole* of anchor and tag.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +32 497 497292.

E-mail address: ditte.kimps@arts.kuleuven.be (D. Kimps).

[1] Invariant tags were excluded because we wanted to investigate the systematic correlations between speech function and formal features found only in variable tags such as polarity patterns, presence of modals, etc.

(1) That's not very good, is it. (COLT)[2]
(2) Like, is it cos I'm black, isn't it. (COLT)
(3) Ah you're making an assumption there are you. (WB)
(4) Go a bit slower will you. (COLT)

The polarity of the anchor and tag can either be reversed, as in (1) and (2), or be held constant, as in (3) and (4). The anchor may be realized by different clause types: besides declarative anchors (1, 3) TQs can also have an imperative (4) or interrogative anchor (2), even though the latter is exceptional.

With regard to the meaning of English TQs, we will follow the functional linguistic tradition of distinguishing interactional meanings from stance meanings (e.g. McGregor, 1997:222–245; Simon-Vandenbergen and Aijmer, 2007:301). On the one hand, tags indicate which interactional position the speaker assumes in the dialogue and which response s/he expects from the hearer (McGregor, 1997:245), that is, they help code what Halliday (1994:69) calls the ''speech function'' of the utterance. On the other hand, tags modify the way in which the anchor relates to ''presuppositions, expectations, and attitudes of speaker and hearer'' (McGregor, 1997:222–233) assigning, for instance, different degrees of epistemic speaker commitment to the proposition (McGregor, 1997; Mithun, 2012). The dimensions of speech function and modal modification are conceived of as distinct in functional linguistic theories (e.g. Hengeveld, 1989; Halliday, 1994; Verstraete, 2007, chap. 1–2), with speech function scoping over the modally modified proposition. For instance, a modalized proposition such as 'he maybe likes me' may be exchanged as a request for information, *Does he maybe like me?*, or as the giving of information, *Maybe he likes me.* This article focuses on the interactional dimension in the semantics and pragmatics of TQs. Its aim is to develop a comprehensive, data-driven description of the basic speech functions English TQs can realize, which is not yet available in the literature.

In existing studies, two main approaches to the interactional semantics of TQs can be distinguished. The first approach can be characterized as strongly grammar-based. It aims at elucidating the illocutionary force of different types of TQs on the basis of formal variables such as intonation and polarity. Within this tradition, Quirk et al. (1985) have been particularly influential. They view TQs as basically a ''further type of *yes–no* question which conveys positive or negative orientation'' (1985:810). They focus on TQs with reversed polarity, the most common type, which can have either positive–negative (5) or negative–positive (6) polarity. According to Quirk et al, intonation is the formal variable determining the most fundamental meaning distinctions. TQs with a *rising* tone on the tag express doubt and expect the hearer to decide on the truth of the proposition in the anchor, i.e. they invite *verification* by the hearer of the proposition. They are biased, or 'oriented', towards the polarity of the anchor (1985:811). Thus, the speaker expects a positive answer in (5) but a negative one in (6).

(5) He likes his J\OB, D/OESn't he? (Quirk et al., 1985:811)
(6) He doesn't like his J\OB, D/OES he? (Quirk et al., 1985:811)

TQs with a *fall* on the tag do not express doubt and invite *confirmation* by the hearer of the proposition. As Huddleston and Pullum (2002:894), who follow Quirk et al.'s analysis, put it, they function as a ''question [that] merely seeks acknowledgement that the anchor is true''. Example (7), for instance, assumes that it is true that 'she was angry' and seeks the hearer's acknowledgment of this.

(7) She was A\NGry, W\ASn't she. (Quirk et al., 1985:811)

Quirk et al. (1985:811) observe that such TQs do not have the force of a genuine question. They suggest that (7) is more like an exclamation such as *Wasn't she A\NGry!*

Quirk et al.'s description contains a number of good basic insights. One is the observation that TQs that ask the hearer to decide on the truth of the proposition generally have a rise on the tag. Another is the point that reversed polarity tags convey the speaker's bias towards the positivity or negativity of the proposition in the anchor. However, these general points still need a lot of fine-tuning and filling out, as we will show when we flesh them out with more qualitative and quantitative descriptive detail in Section 4. Also, despite the occasional nuance that TQs such as (7) are not genuine questions, the main thrust of Quirk et al.'s analysis of TQs is in terms of the concept of 'question'. This has carried over into other grammar-based approaches such as Huddleston and Pullum (2002) and Collins (2006), who subsumes TQs under ''additional question types in English'' (Collins, 2006:186). This does not do justice to the great range of speech functions besides questions that we will show TQs can fulfill.