On the Uses of English Tag Questions: A Corpus Investigation

English tag questions (TQ) are sensitive to three main formal factors: the choice of auxiliary and pronoun, polarity (negation), and intonation pattern (i.e., The boy is happy, isn’t he?). The auxiliary in the tag must agree with the tense, aspect, and modality of the main auxiliary verb in the anchoring clause. The polarity value of the TQ needs to be balanced with that of the anchoring clause: when the main clause is positive, the TQ is negative, and vice versa. The pronoun in the tag also must agree with the person, number, and gender value of the main clause’s subject. Intonation also determines the use: the rising intonation is used to solicit information whereas the falling one strengthens the statement or seeks the agreement of the hearer (Culicover 1992, Kay 2002, Tottie and Hoffmann 2006).

Even though the general uses of TQs follow the described constraints, their actual use in real life appears to be much more complex. This paper aims to report the corpus findings of English TQs from the COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English) with 560 million words. In particular, we investigate the uses of constant polarity TQs where the tag has the same polarity as that of the anchoring clause:

(1) a. You’ve experienced trouble with others, have you? (COCA 2017 FIC)
   b. This isn’t finished, isn’t it? (COCA 2016 Spoken)

Examples like (1a) is informational in the sense that the speaker seeks for the information whether the addressee has the experience with others, out of curiosity. (1b) has a confirmatory function: the speaker tries to confirm the negative proposition with no strong commitment to it. To understand the uses of 142 constant TQs, we have identified their discourse functions in the four different types: confirmatory (59.2%), informational (10.1%), hortatory (7.2%), and affective (26.5%). The corpus search yields only 12 types of the constant TQs with the negative polarity (e.g., You didn’t think the girl was going to get that, didn’t you?), but 90% uses are confirmatory, expressing the speaker’s uncertainty toward the situation of the matrix clause. We have also observed the uses of reverse tag questions in these four main functions.

The corpus data thus show us that constant TQs also also have the same discourse functions as oppositive polarity TQs, even though the dominant uses are for confirmatory. This implies that just like oppositive polarity PQs, constant polarity TQs are also key part of the TQ grammar (see Kimps 2007 also).

Words count: 413

Selected References