

МОВОЗНАВСТВО, ЛІТЕРАТУРОЗНАВСТВО

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USING OF THE TAG QUESTIONS IN THE ENGLISH TEXTS

Ключові слова: розділові питання, п'єса, період.

Антофійчук Ірина. Використання розділових питань в англомовних текстах

В статті йдеться про кількісне використання та розвиток розділових питань у англомовних текстах раннього періоду та до сьогодення. На основі великого зібрання англомовних п'єс можна показати, що розділові питання були досить поширеним явищем.

Given the obvious lack of authentic data for earlier periods of English, historical linguists who are interested in features of spoken language must necessarily base their investigations on written representations of speech. For the purpose of the present paper, I make use of a large corpus of English drama that is available as part of the Chadwyck-Healey Literature Collections. It contains more than 3,900 plays from a large range of different genres and covers a period of over 700 years, spanning the late thirteenth to the early twentieth century. In basing my investigation of the development and use of historical tag questions on a collection of literary works, I will thus follow the assumption that authors of English drama created dialogues for their plays that are sufficiently close to the actual speech patterns of their period in order to be used as a proxy for spoken language.

This approach raises a number of important methodological issues which would no doubt deserve a detailed discussion in a separate study. For example, differences in literary conventions of the various periods may have influenced the extent to which the reality of spoken interaction is reflected on stage. Also, authors of historical plays may choose to portray their characters as belonging to an earlier period of time by deliberately assigning conservative speech patterns to their lines. The results obtained from an analysis of a diachronic drama corpus must therefore certainly be interpreted with caution. For the purposes of the present paper, however, I will assume that such factors do not greatly influence the use of tag questions in English drama and that my database is an adequate basis for the description of their development in English drama and that my database is an adequate

basis for the description of their development in English.

The Chadwyck-Healey Literature Collections can be accessed with the help of a Web-based search interface. Its query syntax is restricted to lexical searches but a number of wildcard options are offered to account for spelling variants in earlier texts. The retrieval of tag questions thus involves a search for all possible operator-pronoun combinations followed by a manual selection of relevant instances from the query result. In contrast to many other Web-based facilities, the search engine provided for accessing the English Drama Collection does not implement a list of stop words. As a result, a basic search string such as „is it not”, which consists of three very common lexical items that would typically be ignored by search engines, can be used to retrieve all potentially relevant instances of this particular question tag.

A purely lexical search for all possible operator-pronoun combinations retrieves almost 50,000 instances. A number of structural and lexical constraints were therefore introduced which considerably reduced the overall size of the query result. For example, instances were discarded if they occurred at the beginning of a turn or if they were immediately preceded by a w/z-pronoun (e.g. Where is it?). After applying these restrictions 8,612 instances remained for closer manual analysis.

While most of these remaining sentences presented no difficulties for the categorization, a number of uncertain cases required closer attention. In order to be counted as a tag question, the retrieved instances had to conform to a relatively restricted set of formal features.

A considerable number of instances were retrieved whose status as potential tag questions is difficult to assess without access to information about their prosodic features.

Finally, only a limited amount of material was allowed to occur between anchor clause and tag.

After manually discarding all irrelevant instances, the final set of data consisted of 5,899 historical tag questions.

The quantitative description of diachronic trends requires that relative frequency counts can be calculated for different categories and periods of the corpus. Unfortunately, for the English Drama Collection no detailed information is available about word-counts for different periods or individual texts. However, a complete list of bibliographical information is provided which contains links to the full contents of all texts, and it is therefore possible to establish a relatively accurate estimate of the overall size of the corpus. Table 1 displays the number of texts and their estimated word-counts in periods of 50 years (excluding stage directions and other elements that do not contain written representations of speech). Thus, the complete corpus contains approximately 50 million words, and all except the earliest two periods and the twentieth-century plays represent sizable chunks of data amounting to several million words of text.

In order to compare my findings for the historical development of tag questions with current usage, I will draw on the results presented in Tottie and Hoffmann (forthcoming), who report on tag questions in Present-day British and American English on the basis of two large spoken corpora, with the spoken component of the British National Corpus (spoken-demographic section only) and the Longman Spoken American Corpus (LSAC). Given the exclusively British content of the English Drama Collection, direct comparisons of frequencies of tag questions will be restricted to the British data.

I first present a general overview of the diachronic development of tag questions in the English Drama Collection. The distribution of the complete set of 5,899 tag questions over 50-year periods.

Figure 1 shows that tag questions are virtually absent from the earliest periods of English drama. In fact, my search retrieved only a single instance from texts that were written before the year 1550.

The second oldest instance in the English Drama Collection is found in an anonymous Tudor play which was performed in the early 1550s. A total of seven tag questions were retrieved for the time between 1550 and 1574. A further 122 instances found in plays written between 1575 and 1599 attest to the fact that canonical tag questions had become firmly established as part of the commu-

nicative system of Early Modern English by the end of the sixteenth century.

Figure 1 further shows that the use of tag questions was relatively stable for 200 years (between 1550 and 1750) but then, after 1750, dramatically increased in frequency: with 428 instances per million words the early twentieth century texts contain about seven times as many tag questions as Tudor and Elizabethan drama. However, this figure is still relatively low when it is compared to Present-day English spontaneous conversations as represented by the spoken-demographic component of the British National Corpus, where tag questions occur with a frequency of 4,383 instances. Even though a direct comparison between spontaneous interaction and the written representation of speech in drama is problematic, it seems reasonable to interpret these figures as signs of a continued increase in the use of tag questions throughout the twentieth century rather than as a sign of changing conventions in the representation of spoken language.

Period	N texts	estimated
-1500	218	500,000
1500 - 1549	42	300,000
1550- 1599	184	3,000,000
1600 - 1649	595	9,250,000
1650 - 1699	430	8,000,000
1700 - 1749	457	6,000,000
1750 - 1799	683	8,250,000
1800- 1849	743	8,500,000
1850- 1899	485	5,750,000
1900-	73	750,000
Total	3,910	50,300,000

In Present-day English, tag questions are particularly common in spontaneous conversation. Thus, in the British National Corpus, they occur about four times more frequently in the spoken-demographic than in the spoken context-governed part which predominantly contains language use of a more formal nature and it is therefore likely that the different genres covered by, they will also exhibit considerable differences in the use of historical tag questions. However, since this set of data was not compiled as a balanced and representative corpus, the genre composition of various periods may vary greatly. As a result, the frequency development displayed above and may be partly showed by the overrepresentation of individual genres. Also, some genres go out of fashion (e.g. „History”, which is only found in texts dating from the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century) and new ones are established (e.g. „Farce”, first found in texts of the second half

of the seventeenth century). A brief look at some major genres is therefore required to verify the validity of the findings presented in the previous subsection.

Figure 2 displays the frequency of tag questions in texts belonging to the genres Comedy and Tragedy, which are the only two genres that are found in all periods of Early and Late Modern English. Together, they cover about 60 per cent - approximately 30 million words - of all texts in the English Drama Collection.

As is immediately apparent, the historical development of tag questions in these two genres is radically different. While their use in Tragedy remains more or less stable at a low level, Comedy exhibits an even greater increase in frequency (67 instances in the sixteenth century; 1,293 instances in early twentieth century plays) than shown for the complete English Drama Collection in Figure 1 above.

The third largest genre in my data carries very general label Drama; it contains approximately five million words. This genre is only represented in sufficient numbers in the three periods between 1750 and 1900. This genre thus matches the overall development as shown in Figure 1. Most other categories are too small to provide reliable frequency counts, but genres belonging to the area of light entertainment (e.g. Farce) seem to exhibit particularly high levels of increase over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In sum, with the exception of Tragedy, all of the larger genres contained in the English Drama Collection appear to conform to the general development described for the complete corpus. It is thus not the case that the information contained in Figure 1 is heavily showed by conflicting developments in various genres. Furthermore, this cross-genre comparison also shows that the correlation between formality of the language situation and the use of tag questions in spoken interaction also holds for English drama. Tragedies typically contain a large proportion of formal language situations, while the opposite is the case for comedies and other humorous text types.

The complete set of 5,899 tag questions retrieved from the English Drama Collection covers a total of 455 types of verb-pronoun combinations in tags, many of which are found in very low frequencies. However, the number of different types is considerably reduced (203) if spelling variants for the different pronouns and auxiliaries are normalized. The most frequent question tags are „will you“? (431 instances, 7.3%), „is it“? (359 instances, 6.1%) and „do you“? (326 instances, 5.5%). Almost half of the instances of „will you“? are found in tags that are attached to an imperative anchor clause. When only declarative anchor

clauses are considered, „is it“? (357 instances, 6.4%) is most frequent, followed by „do you“? (326 instances, 6.5%) and „isn't It“? (281 instances, 5.1%).

Interestingly, the distribution of different question tag types does not change dramatically during the whole period covered by the English Drama Collection. This is shown, which lists the ten most frequent question tags in the period from 1550 to 1649 and in plays written after 1850. If full forms and contracted variants (e.g. is it not? and isn't it?) are considered equivalent, seven types retrieved from sixteenth and early seventeenth drama also rank among the most frequent question tags in the nineteenth and twentieth century data.

As already briefly stated in the introduction, reversed polarity is the norm for the Present-day English use of canonical tag questions. Tottie and Hoffmann report that only eight per cent of all instances retrieved from the British National Corpus exhibit constant polarity, virtually all of which are of the positive-positive type. Among the reversed polarity tags, positive-negative combinations are more common than negative-positive variants (75% vs. 17% of all tag questions). Wikberg's findings for Shakespearean plays suggest that the situation was not dramatically different in Elizabethan times. He lists a total of 44 tag questions, 33 of which (75%) are positive-negative instances. Interestingly, positive-positive tag questions are more common in Wikberg's material than the negative-positive reversed polarity type. No negative constant polarity tags are found in Shakespeare's plays.

As in Wikberg's data, constant polarity tags outnumber the negative-positive reversed polarity type (30% vs. 20.3%). However, with just under half of all instances, positive-negative tag questions account for a considerably smaller proportion than they do in Shakespeare's plays and Present-day English conversation.

Negative constant polarity constructions, finally, are clearly a rare phenomenon throughout the history of tag questions. In fact, their existence has occasionally been questioned. Nevertheless, with a total of 24 instances in my data, they are certainly too frequent to be dismissed. Sentences exemplify the use of this rare type of tag question in different periods of English drama:

Yes, Sir, but, you see, he has not appear'd, may not I put up my rapier now, and go home again with my honour, may I not! (William Clark: *Marciano*, 1662).¹

You won't, Old Pluto, won't you; then, ma'am, observe! (Frederick Reynolds: *The dramatist*, 1789).²

And he wouldn't be persuaded by the ladies, wouldn't he? (Frank E. Emson: *The Weller family*,

1878).³

The unexpectedly low proportion of negative-positive tag constructions can be explained when a diachronic dimension is added to the picture.

Figure 3 shows the relative proportion of POS-NEG, NEG-POS and POS-POS tag questions in English drama in 50-year periods starting from the year 1550. Due to their low overall frequency, negative constant polarity tag constructions are excluded from Figure 3.

Interestingly, positive-negative tag constructions start out from a relatively high proportion of 67.5 per cent but then gradually decrease until the second half of the eighteenth century. During this period, positive-negative tag constructions are in fact even slightly less frequent than constant polarity tags (39.7% POS-NEG vs. 40.6% POS-POS). From the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards, this trend is again reversed: positive-negative tag constructions once more account for the majority of all tag questions while the proportion of constant polarity tags decreases by half. Considering the low proportion of constant polarity tags in the British National Corpus, this development appears to have continued during the twentieth century. From the point of view of polarity, sixteenth century tag questions are thus closer to Present-day English usage than any other period in between.

It is difficult to speculate about the underlying reasons for the development. A possible explanation may be found in the different pragmatic functions performed by tag questions of the various polarity types. Thus, a closer look at the period between 1750 and 1799 - i.e. the period where constant polarity tags are most frequent - reveals that a considerable number of constant polarity tags express an adversarial stance on the part of the speaker. Reversed polarity tags, conversely, do not exhibit this kind of attitude to the same extent.

Oh! what, you are asleep, are you— I'll waken you, with a vengeance. (Knocks with his heel.) (Isaac Bickerstaff: *Tis well it's no worse*, 1770).³

I know you, Mammon! You will tell a different tale tomorrow. I'm a coxcomb, am I? I'll punish you! (Thomas Holcroft: *Love's frailties*, 1794).³

What, dost thou dare to appear before me with that serpent's tongue of thine, sloughed over with lies? You dare to bring your stories to me, do you [shaking him violently by the collar.] (Joanna Baillie: *The election*, 1798) [21, 45].⁴

While I would be wary of equating syntactic form with pragmatic function, a certain level of correlation certainly appears to exist, at least for the second half of the eighteenth century. In Present-day English, 'aggressive' tag questions - of any polarity type - are a marginal category; they only account for one per cent of all tag questions in

the spoken-demographic component of the British National Corpus. It could thus be speculated that the loss of this particular pragmatic function may have contributed to a decrease in the frequency of constant polarity tags during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, only a detailed diachronic analysis of the pragmatic types of historical tag questions could reveal whether this hypothesis is indeed correct.

In Present-day English, the position of the negative particle in questions depends on the choice between the full form *not* and the enclitic *n't*. If the full form is used, it generally follows the subject (e.g. *Did he not call you?*) where as *n't* is appended to the auxiliary (e.g. *Didn't he call you?*) and thus precedes the subject. The use of the full form is normally considered more formal than its contracted variant. In the sixteenth century, however, the situation was quite different. The contracted form of the negative particle was not yet available and the position of *not* in negative questions was variable between pre-subject and post-subject position. As a case in point, consider the two typical instances.

Will not the Ladies be afear'd of the Lyon?
(William Shakespeare: *Richard III*, 1597).⁵

Howe like you the Ladies, are they not passing faire?
(John Lyly: *Sapho and Phao*, 1584) [24, 56].⁵

The choice between the two variants appears to have been conditioned by a number of factors, including the phonetic weight of the subject as well as its status as given or new information. Rissanen (1994, 340-1), who investigated the placement of the negative particle in questions in the Early Modern subperiod (1500 - 1570) of the Helsinki Corpus, concludes that when the subject is a personal pronoun, it precedes *not* in the majority of examples.

With respect to their syntactic form, the appended clause in tag questions with POS-NEG and NEG-NEG polarity belong to the category of negative questions with pronominal subjects. However, in the sixteenth century data, the order of their individual components is much more fixed than in other types of negative questions. Thus, in virtually all occurrences of question tags the negative particle follows the subject, as shown in example. The only instance where *not* precedes the pronominal subject is displayed in.⁶

In Present-day English, by contrast, negative tag questions are almost exclusively formed with the enclitic *n't* and structures such as the one shown in no longer exist. Given these considerable structural changes, it is necessary to look at the development of the different variants in more detail.

Figure 4 displays the proportions of tags containing the negative particle in pre-subject and post-subject position over 50-year periods of the

English Drama Collection. Pre-subject position variants with an enclitic n't are listed separately from their full counterparts. Figure 4 shows that the earliest examples of tag questions containing the enclitic n't are found in the first half of the seventeenth century. They then steadily increase in frequency and account for 90 per cent of all instances by the early twentieth century. As a consequence, the proportion of tags containing post-subject not drops from almost 100 per cent to a more ten per cent. The third variant with pre-subject not only plays a marginal role. Its proportional share gradually rises until the second half of the eighteenth century but never reaches more than 18 per cent. Its frequency then drops sharply and it virtually ceases to exist as a possible variant by the second half of the nineteenth century.

The question remains whether there is a connection between the use of the uncontracted not in pre-subject position and its contracted variant. For example, it would not be unreasonable to assume that the uncontracted version could have paved the way for an increase in the use of enclitic n't in tag questions. Indeed, the earliest occurrence of the uncontracted variant predates the use of contracted forms, and once contracted forms become available, they quickly outnumber the uncontracted variants. Even so, frequencies are far too low to draw any reliable conclusions. Alternatively, it could be hypothesized that the full variant is simply the written representation of the contracted form in spoken language. However, this interpretation does not receive strong support from my data. If this were indeed the case, it would perhaps not be very likely that authors would employ both variants in the same text. Yet, of the 77 texts containing an uncontracted not in pre-subject position, 21 also contain at least one instance of a contracted tag question. Furthermore, other uses of the enclitic n't can be found in all except three of these 77 files, which suggests that authors would clearly have had the choice of opting for a contracted variant of tag questions. It thus seems more likely that other factors - e.g. prosodic features such as stress and rhythm may have been a more important influence in the choice between the variants.

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Antofiychuk Irina. L'UTILISATION DES QUESTIONS DE LA SÉPARATION DANS DES TEXTES ANGLAIS.

Dans l'article il s'agit de l'utilisation quantitative et du développement des questions de la séparation dans des textes anglais de la première période et jusqu'à aujourd'hui. Les recherches sont basés sur une grande quantité de pièces de théâtre anglophones ce que permet de voir la fréquence de ce type de questions.
Mots-clés: questions de la séparation, pièces de théâtre, période.

Антофийчук Ирина. ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЕ РАЗДЕЛИТЕЛЬНЫХ ВОПРОСОВ В АНГЛОЯЗЫЧНЫХ ТЕКСТАХ

В статье анализируются количество использования и развитие разделительных вопросов в англоязычных текстах раннего периода и до наших дней. На основе большого собрания англоязычных пьес можно показать, что разделительные вопросы были довольно распространенным явлением.

Ключевые слова: разделительные вопросы, пьеса, период.