

How dialogic are tag questions?

A contrastive study in British English and European Portuguese

Tag questions (TQs) are a very high-yielding grammatical device used to express a wide range of meanings, and for that reason, they are found across many textual genres. However, as prior investigations have suggested (Calnan & Davidson, 1998; Kimps et al., 2014; ***, 2012, 2014; *** and ***, 2020; *** & ***, 2022, 2023), correlations exist between genres and the frequency of use of TQs.

To follow up with this research, this study contrasts the frequency of use, type and function of TQ across dialogic and monologic texts in two languages, British English and European Portuguese. For English, the data was extracted from the spoken component of the International Corpus of English-Great Britain (ICE-GB) (Nelson *et al.*, 2002), and, for European Portuguese, from the sub-corpus of the Integrated Reference Corpora for Spoken Romance Languages) (Cresti and Moneglia, 2005).

The corpus was then annotated according to two parameters: type of TQ and function. Concerning the type of TQ, we considered the distinction between variable TQ (1) when the question tag (in italics) is structurally and lexically dependent on the anchor (underlined) and invariable TQ (2) when the question tag is not dependent on the anchor (Hudson, 1975; Kimps, 2018; *** & ***, 2022).

To explore the functional characteristics of TQ, whether variable or invariable, we adopted the functional model proposed in our prior work *** (2018), *** & *** (2014) and *** & *** (2022, 2023). Accordingly, TQs were classified into eight functionalities: informational, hortatory, facilitative, affective, challenging, focusing, phatic and regulatory. Informational, hortatory and facilitative are addressee-centred, but while the first aims at eliciting additional or confirmatory information (1), the other two are action-seeking, hortatory TQs being used as demands or invitations (2) and facilitative TQs as polite strategies to give the floor to the addressee (3). Affective (4) and challenging (5) TQs, on the other hand, are speaker-centred, the former focusing on his/her opinions, emotions, and feelings towards the content of the anchor, and the latter operating as confrontational strategies. Finally, focusing (6), phatic (7) and regulatory (8) TQs are centred on the exchange, requesting the addressee's attentiveness to what is being said (focusing), controlling contact (phatic), or self-regulating the exchange (regulatory).

The findings of our study, grounded on statistical significance tests, revealed a low frequency of TQ in monologues compared to dialogues and a higher frequency in European Portuguese than in British English across the two TQ types. Moreover, the results of the Boruta algorithm (Kursa & Rudnicki, 2010), utilised to determine the feature importance to predict TQ use, confirmed that genre is a significant variable to determine the frequency, type and function of TQs, although with different degrees of importance for the two languages.

Overall, our results align with prior work (Recsky, 2006; ***, 2014; *** & ***, 2022, 2023), thereby confirming the dialogic nature of TQs and the existence of genre-based correlations.

Examples

- (1) You've seen Martin's hall haven't you? <ICE-GB:S1A-073 #4:1:B> (***, 2022)
- (2) I'll give you a ring next time I'm down and we'll try and meet OK? <ICE-GB:S1A-038#011:1:A> (***, 2022)
- (3) A: You've seen you've seen Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles haven't you?
B: I have. Yes. We can get that out if you want. <ICE-GB:S1A-006 #159:1:B>
- (4) Um colégio razoável, razoavelzinho, não é ? <CORALR ptelpv03>
“A reasonable school, kind of reasonable, isn't it?” (***, 2014)
- (5) Desde que a vossa caravela da, hhh, dos quinhentos anos não navegou, não é?
<CORALR pfamdl04>
“Your caravel hasn't sailed since it turned five hundred years old, has it?” (***, 2014)
- (6) But everybody talks about them you see? don't they? as being so marvellous <,> <ICE-GB:S1A-016 #203:1:D> (***, 2022)
- (7) ORQ: fomos a um restaurante brasileiro // <<|está bem|>> ? <CORALRptelpv08> (***, 2022)
- (8) GRA: Dava então muitas aulas / só / a pessoas / já formadas // normalmente médicos / e engenheiros // <não é? > <CORALRpfamcv03>
'GRA: At the time you taught many classes only to graduates normally doctors and engineers, right? (***, 2022)

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