

Can English Tag Questions Grammaticalise ?

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Abstract

This article addresses the possibility that English question tags may have undergone a process of grammaticalisation, to the extent that some examples function as discourse markers or particles. The data is taken from a corpus of naturally-occurring English conversation, from which 50 tokens have been selected for analysis. The tokens vary in function, supporting earlier categorisations as informational, facilitative and attitudinal. A preliminary prosodic analysis of the attitudinal tokens suggests that there may also be prosodic cues to the function as attitudinal particle.

1. Introduction

Question extensions exist in many languages: in English they include systematically variable question tags, e.g. *isn't it, haven't you*; German 'Nachziehfragen' take forms such as *nicht wahr, nicht, oder*. In Spanish we have *verdad*, in Catalan *veritat*, in French *n'est-ce pas, pas vrai, non*. Such tags are assumed to be conducive, in that they require a positive or negative response. Pragmatically they can soften the face threat of a bald assertion by requesting belief rather than presupposing it. (Lakoff 1972, in Cuenca 1997, 9), and therefore can be accounted for in terms of hedging or politeness.

Because tag questions convey subjective beliefs about the propositions rather than any inherent truth value, Cuenca argues that they are examples of subjectification, a process commonly associated with grammaticalisation. The aim of this paper is to explore question tags from this perspective, suggesting that question tags may be following a path of semantic change similar to that of discourse markers. I examine both contextual and limited prosodic evidence for a 'layered' set of meanings ranging from the most literal and transparent, to uses which express interpersonal meaning.

2. English Tag Questions

Tag questions in English (*isn't it, haven't you* etc) are a well-described phenomenon. The function of the tags in interaction has been categorised in a variety of ways: Holmes (1982) identifies two broad categories – epistemic modal and affective, while and Tottie & Hoffmann (2006) have three main categories that are of interest here: informational, facilitating and attitudinal. The 'attitudinal tag', according to Tottie & Hoffman, "emphasises what the speaker says (and) does not expect involvement or reply" (2006). Unlike the other types of question tags, which are assumed to occur at the end of utterances, these 'attitudinal tags' are said to occur utterance-medially, thus suggesting indeed that a reply is not required.

There are a number of features of these accounts that support the notion that tag questions may have undergone a degree of grammaticalisation, possibly beyond Cuenca's original claim. The accounts bear great similarity to the process thought to be involved in the development of discourse markers, involving the shift from (more-or-less) literal meaning ('informational'), to subjective or textual meaning ('confirmatory'), to intersubjective or interpersonal meaning ('attitudinal'). If this also applies to question tags, we would expect to find some examples at the more literal end of the spectrum, in this case being understood as genuine questions, followed by a subjective or textual usage of some kind, followed by an interpersonal function where all sense of interrogation has been lost. This is the framework that I have applied to a small set of data taken from informal English conversation. Grammaticalisation is also assumed to involve attenuation of form (reduction) and this has been observed for other discourse markers, e.g. *of course* (Wichmann et al. forthcoming). Attenuation in English involves loss of prosodic prominence (accent) and the consequent reduction of duration and care of articulation. In this paper I will therefore take a preliminary look at the prosody in my data, to assess whether any such trend is observable in the case of question tags.

3. Data and method

The data is taken from a corpus of British English (ICE GB), which contains ca 750 examples of question tags, in a variety of speaking styles. Since the 'attitudinal' tags – those thought to be least likely to elicit a response, can be assumed to occur utterance-medially, the first 50 tokens occurring in this position were chosen for analysis, in the hope that this set would yield the greatest number of such tags. The analysis quickly revealed that orthographic transcriptions can be

misleading. The intonation contours show that a number of apparently utterance-medial question tags are in fact utterance final, with additional material simply postposed, as in (1). Such dislocation is common in spontaneous speech.

- (1) Uhm (you) can do a basic lookup can't you for a word and ..
[ICE-GB:S1A-029]

The fifty tokens were analysed using a broadly Conversation Analytic approach, categorising the examples according to participant response. I assumed, for example, that if the Hearer provided what could be classed as a reply (*yes, no, well...*) then the *q* tag had been understood as an attempt to elicit information, i.e. it still functioned as a question. If, however, there was only minimal backchannel feedback (*mmh, right*) the tag was assumed to have been taken to elicit support for the current speaker turn. The final category consisted of those where there was no audible participant response. A prosodic analysis was undertaken of a subset of the latter category.

4. Results

Of the tokens analysed, 36% appeared to elicit no audible response from the participants (see Table 1). A similar number (42%) elicited what could be classed as replies, while only 16 % elicited backchannel responses. Of the remaining cases, one elicited a non-verbal response, as can be clearly inferred from the subsequent talk, one elicited laughter, and two others elicited collaborative talk.

Informational (reply)	21 (42%)
Facilitating (Backchannel)	8 (16%)
Attitudinal (No feedback)	18 (36%)
other	4 (8%)
Total	50 (100%)

Table 1. Tokens of *q* tags categorised according to the type of participant response elicited.

4.1. Informational and facilitating tags

The kind of exchange where speakers are clearly seeking information is shown in example (2), while those apparently eliciting backchannel are exemplified in (3).

- (2) B> Uhm how long do they go on for
C> Six days
B> Right || Now you 're going out t to France the end of that time is it or a

month later

C> July the fifteenth || so it 's just just <unclear-syllables> || I said I 'd ||
[ICE-GB:S1A-011]

- (3) C> Well when it came when he came back from America just didn't seem as though he was <,,> || **I mean he 's got he 's got a lot of problems at work and with the gipsies and everything hasn't he so**

B> Mm || Yeah <,,>

C> So

[ICE-GB:S1A-049]

4.2. Attitudinal tags

Of particular interest here are those cases where there appears to be no response at all from the participants. These are the 'attitudinal' tags described by Tottie and Hoffman. Such usage suggests that *q* tags have undergone a further stage of grammaticalisation – to perform an interpersonal rather than a text organising function. One caveat has to be made, however, in relation to the current study – the transcriptions of the data in ICE GB are not laid out in the format used in conversation studies. Overlapping speech is not indicated, and backchannel responses are given as a separate turn, rather than indicating exactly where they occur. This is visible in the following example (4), where square brackets, not in the original transcription, show that the response occurs after the *q* tag and not at the end of the utterance.

- (4) B: yes that's nasty isn't it [because nobody] is going to go there if they're happy at their own school
A: [It's true]
[ICEGB S1A 054]

This means that evidence of backchannel responses had to be assessed by listening to the sound files, while using the original transcription as a rough guide. In (4) we find that although at first sight it appears that there is no response to the *q* tag, in fact speaker B responded immediately to speaker A's statement containing the *q* tag. Speaker A did not wait for feedback, however, suggesting that A may not have intended to invite confirmatory response. Nonetheless, we cannot count this example as 'attitudinal' if our evidence is derived from participant response.

In another case (5), we are obliged to infer from the subsequent talk that some kind of non-verbal feedback was given. In this conversation, a lecturer appears to be advising a student on possible courses to take. The student has obviously indicated non-verbally that the course details are not as impressive as the teacher hopes, and confirms this verbally later.

- (5) Well <,,> might be worth looking at || I 'm not sure whether you uh <,> || **Looks quite impressive doesn't it** || Mhm || Oh right || Right || It doesn't

appeal so much ||
 A> It doesn't || OK
 [ICE-GB:S1A-035]

Nonetheless, despite a number of misleading examples of this kind, there were many cases – 19 of the 50 tokens analysed – where there was no evidence of any hearer-response to the *q* tag. These appear to fall into three further categories - those that occur at a topic shift, those that are anaphoric, i.e. referring back to a previous utterance, and others.

4.2.1. Topic shifts

Two of the tokens occurred at the point when a narrator was coming to the end of a topic, just before a topic shift, as in example (6).

- (6) A> First of all <> uh how do you see the future of the group <>
 B> Uhm <> well we 're sort of working towards our first performance <> ...
 (text omitted) || Uhm <> personally I I would like to <> to do that very
 much <> || Uhm <> I always keep saying I wish it had start || I wish I 'd
 got involved <> ten years earlier because you know <> I 'm getting old ||
 <laugh> and uhm <> you know I mean <>
 || There you go || **you see I am talking about the stereotype dancer 's <>
 life aren't I (a) life span (b) of of dancing (c) ||** but uhm I don't know I || I
 think I would like to go on as as long as I feel that I 'm enjoying it and <> and
 informing <> giving people other people pleasure <> in seeing our work ||
 And and maybe <> I 'll be more experienced then to take on a more <> uhm
 uh a more of a teaching role <> || Uhm <> but we 'll just have to see how
 how it goes I mean <> || But it 's certainly <> at the moment it 's it 's my the
 biggest interest in my life <> right now <>
 [ICE-GB:S1A-003]

The prosody shows clearly that the end of the topic is reached first at point (a), while fragments (b) and (c) are afterthoughts carrying the same falling contour. This is followed by a hesitant phase leading to a new topic. It seems that when speakers are approaching the end of the current topic, they seek the attention and solidarity of the hearer to achieve a joint closing of the topic. Casual observation suggests that this is acknowledged by the hearer by meeting the speaker's gaze, but without multimodal data no claims can be made for the typicality of this behaviour.

4.2.2. Retrospective solidarity

Another common context for *q*tags that appeared not to elicit a response (7 tokens of 18), was when the speaker was responding to a previous utterance in a supportive way, as in example (7).

- (7) B> I work all around sort of Surrey Leatherhead area
 Z> (unclear words)
 A> **That 's a nice area isn't it Leatherhead** || I know that very well <>
 B> Yeah we go to Paines Park || we do all different kinds of ones this winter

Z> So basically Surrey
 C> Mmm
 [ICE-GB:S1A-081]

In such cases, it is clear that some kind of common ground is being sought, either to be able to close a narrative, or to respond sympathetically to a prior turn. Whether this common ground is acknowledged by interlocutors in non-verbal ways is not possible to determine here. It may be that at these moments there are gestures or changes in gaze direction that acknowledge the common ground. However, the *q* tag does not elicit further response because it is in itself a response. See too example (8), in which the speaker comments on the immediately preceding utterance. Such use of *q* tags appears to offer, rather than elicit, confirmation of a proposition.

- (8) D> I was at a high table and I had my feet
 B> No no she you were in Mum 's lap and you used to put your feet on which is completely normal || I don't think you were even slightly embarrassed about that
 A> Yeah || **It 's a funny thought isn't it that I was embarrassed**
 C> Where was that
 B> Oh in Adelaide of course
 A> Only in Church Terrace would I be embarrassed
 C> Oh right || Oh yes
 [ICE-GB:S1A-032]

4.3.3. 'Others'

There are, it seems, only very few – 8 in all – of the so-called 'attitudinal' tags that actually appear to punctuate a narrative in the way Tottie and Hoffman suggest, and even these may elicit non-verbal backchannel feedback that is not evident in the transcription. The example (9) contains no evidence of verbal response and the speaker continues with her turn. The hearer does not respond until the second *q* tag occurs. The first tag occurs in a sequence where the speaker is more or less endorsing the views of the previous speaker (that mass-produced cheese is boring), and this could be interpreted as an example of retrospective solidarity, as in examples (7) and (8) above. The last sentence, however, is treated prosodically as a new beginning (higher pitch and tempo), presenting a different proposition, one that contradicts what has gone before. This *q* tag is clearly utterance final and elicits immediate agreement.

- (9) A> Yes I uh <> I think Marks and Spencer 's lets the side down though (1) **doesn't it** rather because Marks and Spencer 's ordinary brie is uhm very <> uhm tedious and and uhm not properly ripened and uh <> || Uh but I thought that one you know the brie de Meaux 's quite good (2) **isn't it**
 B: Yes
 [ICE-GB:S1A-009]

Similarly, in example (10), the speaker is expanding his previous account (of literary figures who approached a woman's father for permission to meet her). There is no evidence of hearer response at this point and the speaker moves directly towards his conclusion, namely that his interlocutor should try the same strategy.

- (10) B> (text omitted) || Dickens || Now Dickens setting his uh Tale of Two Cities has the meeting of the I forget the name of the girl or the man || indeed so uh probably boring both of them uhm characters || Uh the the Frenchman who marries the doctor 's daughter
 D> I know yes yes
 B> Now they meet on the on the packet sailing from England don't they || And all Dickens says that he he he called on the doctor || And I think that was the etiquette || You called on the man <,>[A> Yes right] and as it were exchange as many words as you could on the way to the study door <,> || **And Othello of course calls on uh Desdemona 's father doesn't he and then he tells her the story of his life** || Yes so you must call on her father quite obviously [A> Really] and uhm <,>
 [ICE-GB:S1A-020]

While examples (10) and (9) above have affinity with retrospective solidarity, although in this case with their own prior utterances, the following example (11) exhibits the kind of 'attitudinal' effect suggested by Tottie and Hoffman.

- (11) C> Yeah I mean it might be best
 A> **Yeah I mean there 's quite a sort of overhead machine overhead on Windows isn't there but I mean you you 've got to have a big big powerful machine to run it or plenty of RAM**
 C> At the same time it 's not going to have Windows then yeah
 [ICE-GB:S1A-029]

At another point in the same conversation there is a similar case (12), but here we have evidence of a delayed response (not indicated in the original transcription) that functions as backchannel a little later in the turn. Whether this response is prompted but the *q* tag itself, or simply a case of backchannel prompted by a final-sounding fall in pitch and a pause is not clear

- (12) B> How how advanced is your database
 A> At least two and three
 B> How how <,> advanced have they got
 Z> (unclear)
 D> Yeah || I think uh just about <,> || And uhm we don't retrieve any citations at the moment <,> || **Uhm can do a basic lookup can't you for a word and bring back the references <,> [B> right] to where it 's in the text** || Uhm it 's quite fast I think || But then <,> again we 're using a subset <unclear-words>
 [ICE-GB:S1A-029]

The final example to be discussed is (13) – a lengthy turn of which this extract constitutes less than a third.

- (13) B> (text omitted) I I felt <,> yes I could have done it a lot better but but I certainly could do what they were doing || I mean I was sort of going further than the stuff that they were they were doing || **So that was <,> I wasn't I mean you always learn don't you every time you see something but I but <,> uhm and I did did learn some oh bits on language** || There were some bits in their uhm <,> uh a little bit on the on N L P || uhm but I'd read that and he didn't really use that || So (turn continues).
[ICE-GB:S1A-060]

There is no evidence of any backchannel responses at this point in the narrative, and the *q* tag seems to be functioning simply as a particle or marker, in Tottie and Hoffmann's view "stressing the speaker's point of view" (2006). Despite the dissimilarity of these examples, they share the fact they do not elicit a direct response from the participants. It is conceivable therefore, that these question tags have become grammaticalised beyond their textual function to become an interpersonal discourse marker, following the pattern that has been posited for other discourse markers. If this is the case, we would expect the prosodic realisation to exhibit some features of attenuation (reduction) and a tendency towards prosodic integration, since this has been observed in other cases of grammaticalisation.

5. Prosody

Previous accounts of the intonation of question tags point mainly to the difference between falling and rising tones, the latter being said to express greater uncertainty. It has not at this stage been possible to analyse all the examples referred to here, and therefore I can make no comment on the relationship between tone choice and functional category. The first step has been to examine the prosody of the 8 tokens described above as 'other'. These are the cases where we would be most likely to find reduction in form, since they seem to have no informational or discourse-organising function. However, of these, six conform to conventional prosodic description, five carrying a fall and one carrying a rise. There are only two cases that reveal signs of attenuation that might indicate a shift to particle function. The first is example (14).

- (14) A> ... Where did I leave my phonocard <,>
B> **Uhm you brought it \up | did you not with a | bit of \paper**
A> Uh there it is <,>
[ICE-GB:S1A-039]

The question tag in this utterance is realised on a low pitch, very fast and is not prosodically separable from the beginning of the following prepositional phrase. Loss of accent, fast delivery and low pitch (indicated here in small font) are all features of low prominence.

The second case is from example (13) above. Here the question tag has been realised as the unstressed prehead of the following intonation phrase. It is again an example of low prominence, and does not conform to any known description of question tag intonation.

So that was <,> I wasn't I mean you \always /learn | don't you ˘every time you \see /something but I but <,> uhm

6. Conclusion

While this is very scant evidence so far, it seems that it is at least possible to find question tags that display features associated with loss of prominence – features that we normally associate with grammatical words. That these cases are also atypical in terms of function, in that they elicit no response from the hearer, reinforces the possibility that the particle function can, but does not necessarily, be reflected in the prosody, despite the strong prosodic tendency to respect the syntactic form.

Although this study is very much in its infancy, there seems to be sufficient interactional evidence, here and in previous studies, to posit a further stage of grammaticalisation for question tags in English. Whether there is more robust prosodic evidence remains to be seen, but in my view it is worth pursuing.

References

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