الجنس وتفسير الأسئلة الذيلية عند طلاب السنة الرابعة في قسم اللغة الإنكليزية في جامعة حماه

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ملخص:

من أكثر الادعاءات المطروحة في مجال العمل الانثوي المبكر حول اللغة هو ان هناك اختلافات بين الذكور والاناث في استخدامهم للأسئلة الذيلية، لذلك كان هناك حاجة كبيرة لمعرفة مدى تأثير الجنس على تفسير التأثير العدواني للأسئلة الذيلية. تم تنفيذ هذه الدراسة في جامعة حماه على عينة مؤلفة من طلاب وطالبات كما انه تم اختيار طريقة الاستبيان لجمع البيانات اللازمة للبحث وبعد جمع البيانات المطلوبة كانت النتائج مختلفة بين الطلاب والطالبات عند تفسير الأسئلة الذيلية المذكورة في الأمثلة. حصل الطلاب الذكور على نسبة اعلى من الاناث خلال استجابتهم لتفسير الأسئلة الذيلية على انه عدواني. انتهت الدراسة بخاتمة تتضمن اهم النقاط المدروسة ضمن البحث إضافة الى بعض التطبيقات اللاحقة للبحث واستخدامه في أبحاث أخرى.

Interpreting the Aggressive Influence of Tag Questions and Its

Relationship with Gender

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Abstract

One of the most emblematic claims of early feminist work on language was that there are systematic differences between men and women in their use of tag questions. Therefore, there was a demand for investigating how gender affects the aggressive interpretation of tag questions. This study was carried out in Hama University on a sample consisting of fifty participants; males and females. The questionnaire strategy was chosen to collect data. After collecting data, findings differ between males and females in their way of interpreting tags mentioned in the propositions. For example, Males specifically had a higher percentage when interpreting tags as aggressive. This research finished with a conclusion and some implications of the study.

1 Introduction

1.1 Language and gender

The belief that women are in some ways abnormal and inferior in their behaviour, and more importantly their speech style, was given further weight by early analyses of male and female speech differences by scholars such as Jespersen (1922), who postulated that women were more refined in their speech, used less coarse and gross expressions, and were uninventive. Such views of women as being somehow 'abnormal' or 'inferior' in their style of speech gradually changed, as researchers began to examine language in detail and the inequalities within it. Lakoff's paper (1975), though based mainly on observations of language, discussed the differences between women and men's language, seeing them as differences, not abnormalities. Research also started to investigate differences in the grammatical structures women and men use and the traditional belief that women are more polite (Brown 1980), and how women use fewer vulgar terms and language closer to Standard English (Milroy and Margrain 1980, Cheshire 1982). The discussion then moved from talking about the simple issue of male dominance to examining in greater detail the different styles, the reactions of each gender, and what they expected of themselves, both as a speaker and an addressee.

1.2 Purpose

This research aims at studying the aggressive effect of tag questions by male and female students at Hama University. It is targetted for testing their linguistic competence when inferring the tags in various discourses regardless of the tags' syntactic formation. This study is significant for teachers and students of English. For example, teachers can get benefit when explaining not only the syntactic form of tags but also the interpretations of those tags due to gender. Students can also find this research important because they get to know more about how grammar can be employed pragmatically to express a certain point.

2 Tag questions

2.1 Description of tag questions

A tag question consists of two parts: an anchor and a tag, as in (1):

(1) It's interesting, <u>isn't it</u>?

The term tag question (henceforth, TQ) goes back to Jespersen (1924, p. 323) and has been very common ever since. However, it has been used in two ways over the years, which may cause some confusion; sometimes for just the tag (e.g. by Quirk et al., 1985, p. 810), but increasingly, as in this study, for

anchor plus tag. The tag may also be called question tag, but, for simplicity, the shorter-term tag is used in the present work. The term anchor for the first part of the TQ is transparent in indicating that the tag is 'anchored' in a preceding clause; this term was introduced by Huddleston and Pullum (2002, p. 891).

In the four-part definition (1985) below, TQs and tags are first defined. Then, the formation of tags in relation to the anchor is described.

1. A tag question is the combination of an anchor and a tag; there may be TQs with declarative, imperative, exclamative and interrogative anchors.

2. A tag is an interrogative clause which is connected to an immediately preceding (or surrounding) clause called an anchor; this anchor is normally a main clause and may be declarative, imperative, exclamative or interrogative.

3. A tag with a declarative, exclamative or interrogative anchor is a string of words with inverted word order, consisting of an operator, a personal pronoun as subject (or existential there) and an optional enclitic negation n't (or a non-enclitic negation not), and expressing the same proposition as in a preceding (or surrounding) declarative, exclamative or interrogative anchor uttered by the same speaker and to which it relates.

4. A tag with an imperative anchor is a string of words with inverted word order, consisting of an operator, a personal pronoun as subject and an optional enclitic negation n't (or non-enclitic negation not), and which is appended to a preceding imperative anchor uttered by the same speaker.

TQs may thus not only be declarative, as in (2), but also imperative, as in (3) and (4), exclamative, as in (5) and (6), and interrogative, as in (7):

(2) It's boring, <u>isn't it</u>?

(3) Open the door, <u>will you</u>?

(4) Let's go back, <u>shall we</u>?

(5) How nice he is, <u>isn't he?</u>

(6) What a nice surprise, <u>isn't it</u>?

(7) Are you coming, <u>are you</u>?

Quirk et al. (1985, p. 811) state that tags may be inserted between constituents in the anchor, but Biber et al. (1999, p. 208) point out that tags "cannot precede the verb phrase of the main clause."

2.2 Reversed and constant polarity

TQs mostly display reversed polarity, i.e. a negative tag follows a positive anchor, as in (8):

(8) It's boring, <u>isn't it</u>?

However, it is also possible to have positive constant polarity, where both the anchor and the tag are positive, as in (9):

(9) It's exciting, <u>is it</u>?

On the other hand, declarative TQs with negative constant polarity, i.e. where both the anchor and the tag are negative, are contested; such TQs have been claimed not to have been "clearly attested in actual use" (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 813). However, research on spoken corpora has revealed "some genuine examples" (Tottie & Hoffmann, 2006, p. 284), as in (10):

(10) They don't come cheap, <u>don't they</u>?

2.3 Marginal TQs

Tags may be used to ask for confirmation of the proposition in the anchor. The definition is designed to cover the TQ phenomenon. However, in spoken language, there are strings which look like tags but do not fulfill the formal requirements in the definition as to the formal relationship to the anchor, although they seem to have similar functions to other tags and can be replaced by the expected tags without a change of

function in the contexts where they occur. Such marginal instances were earlier noted by Biber et al. (1999, p. 209), who stated that "[t]ags are not always strictly modeled on the main clause", and by Algeo (1988, pp. 179-180), who argued that "performance errors account for some anomalies". TQs of that kind are mainly found in spontaneous speech, as such language is produced linearly with the pressures of on-line processing, whereas written language, particularly texts intended for publishing, go through a process of revision and editing intended to improve the text and remove what might be considered as errors.

2.4 Lexical combinations in tags

The operators in tags are most obviously all the finite forms of the primary verbs *be*, *do* and *have*, the modal auxiliaries *can*/*could*, *may*/*might*, *will*/*would*, *shall*/*should*, *must* and the marginal modal *ought* (without *to*). If these operators are combined with the tag subjects *I, you, he, she, it, we, they, one*, and existential *there*, there are (according to Quirk et al., 1985, pp. 811–812) 144-word combinations for positive tags, and twice as many for negative tags, as the negation may be either enclitic or non-enclitic; there would thus be at least 432 different potential word combinations in tags. However, the picture is more complicated than this. Some of the potential

forms are practically non-existent, as some operators are avoided in negative contractions, sometimes being replaced by other operators with similar meaning. The most clearly avoided negative contraction is *amn't*, which is replaced by *aren't*, as in (11); other forms which are avoided are *mayn't* and *oughtn't*.

(11) I'm pretty hopeless at relationships, <u>aren't I</u>?

3 Literature review

Several functional systems have been suggested to be associated with TQs, in particular by Holmes (1982, 1984a, 1984b, 1995), Algeo (1988, 1990, 2006), Roesle (2001) and Tottie and Hoffmann (2006, 2009a, 2009b). There are substantial differences between the proposed functional systems. Holmes and Algeo developed their systems independently for different purposes, and they are based on different kinds of data. Roesle adapted Algeo's system to her data, and Tottie and Hoffmann, using similar data to Roesle, merged the systems of Holmes and Algeo. Those previous functional systems encompass both reversed-polarity and constant-polarity. However, constant-polarity TQs have traditionally been claimed to be used under certain conditions (see for example Quirk et al., 1985), and their functions have been studied separately by Kimps (2007).

3.1 Holmes

Holmes's (1982) classification was an early functional classification of tags based on corpus material, which also presented distributional data. She extracted canonical tags, i.e. variant tags, as well as invariant tags such as *eh*, from a 43,000-word corpus of formal conversations to more formal speech situations, and she discussed these tags in terms of solidarity, i.e. as positive politeness devices. Holmes (1984a, 1984b) showed that there are different functional patterns for men's and women's use of tags: women were found to use more tags "expressing speaker's solidarity with or positive attitude to addressee" (1984a, p. 54). Holmes (1995) used a somewhat extended corpus, and restricted her data to variant tags, distinguishing two functional macro-categories, the second of which is divided into three categories:

1. epistemic modal tags
2. affective tags: a. facilitative tags

               b. softening tags

               c. challenging tags

Holmes based her classification on politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), which states that positive politeness strategies try to save the addressee's positive face, i.e. "the desire (in some respects) to be approved of", whereas negative

politeness strategies try to save the hearer's negative face, i.e. "the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions" (1987, p. 13). Nevertheless, the tags in Holmes's (1995) first category, epistemic modal tags, "express genuine speaker uncertainty rather than politeness" (1995, p. 80), as in (11):

(11) (Husband searching in newspaper for information says to wife)

 Fay Weldon's lecture is at eight <u>isn't it</u>? (rising tone on the tag)

 (Holmes, 1995, p. 80)

Politeness is, however, crucial to the three functions in her macro-category of affective tags. Facilitative tags are thus "positive politeness devices (...) invit[ing] the addressee to contribute to the discourse" (1995, p. 81), as in (12):

(12) (Host addressing a guest at her dinner party)

 You've got a new job Tom, <u>haven't you</u>? (Falling tone on the tag)

 (Holmes, 1995, p. 81)

Softening tags, on the other hand, are "negative politeness devices, used to attenuate the force of negatively affective utterances such as directives (...) and criticisms" (1995, p. 82), as in (13):

(13) (Older brother to younger brother who has just stepped on the cat's bowl and spilled her milk all over the floor)

That was a really dumb thing to do, <u>wasn't it</u>? (Falling tone on the tag) (Holmes, 1995, p. 82)

Lastly, challenging tags are "impolite devices" (1995, p. 81) which "pressure a reluctant addressee to reply or aggressively boost the force of a negative speech act" (1995, p. 80), as in (14):

(14) (Superintendent A criticizing Detective Constable B)

   A: Now you er fully understand that, <u>don't you</u>? (Falling tone on the tag)

   B: Yes, Sir, indeed, yeah. (Holmes, 1995, p. 81)

Holmes showed that women used proportionately more facilitative tags than men; she suggests that the reason is that women have a tendency "to adopt a supportive and facilitative role in conversation" (1995, p. 83). Holmes's focus on politeness has made a substantial contribution to what is known about this aspect of TQs.

3.2 Algeo

Algeo (1988, 1990, 2006) was interested in potential differences between BrE and AmE use of TQs. He observed that there are also impolite uses of TQs, which he considered would not be found in AmE: "the impoliter types are

distinctively British" (1990, p. 449). He distinguished five functional categories, which show "a progressive decline in politeness and in the degree to which they draw the addressed person into the conversation" (1990, p. 445):

1. informational tags.

2. confirmatory tags.

3. punctuational tags.

4. peremptory tags.

5. aggressive tags.

According to Algeo, informational tags are "genuine requests for information" (1990, p. 445) with no expectation of a particular answer, i.e. they are not conducive (see Quirk et al. 1985, p. 808), as in (15):

(15) Q: You don't have to wear any sort of glasses or anything, <u>do you</u>?

   A: Well, I wear glasses for reading sometimes. (Algeo, 1990, p. 445)

Algeo's confirmatory tags naturally ask for confirmation, as in (16), but they can also be used to "draw the person addressed into the conversation" (1990, p. 445).

(6) Q: But you don't have Swindon on your little map, <u>do you</u>?

   A: No, I don't have Swindon on my map. (Algeo, 1990, p. 445)

Punctuational tags are not used to elicit information or confirmation but are "self-centered" in "treat[ing] addressees as audience rather than participants"; such a tag "emphasizes the point that the speaker wishes to make under the guise of asking a question" (1990, p. 446), as in (17):

(17) You classicists, you've probably not done Old English, <u>have you</u>? Course you haven't. (Algeo, 1990, p. 446)

Peremptory tags are said to follow "statement[s] of obvious or universal truth", implying that "everyone knows the truth of the preceding statement, and therefore even someone of the limited intelligence of the addressee must be presumed to recognize it" (1990, p. 446); "the intent – and often the effect – (...) is to leave speechless the person to whom it is directed" (1990, p. 447), as in (18):

(18) I wasn't born yesterday, <u>was I</u>? (Algeo, 1990, p. 447)

Aggressive tags are claimed to follow statements which "the addressee cannot be reasonably expected to know"; "[by] implying that the addressees ought to know what they actually cannot know, the aggressive tag is insulting and provocative" (1990, p. 447), as in (19):

(19) A: I rang you up this morning, but you didn't answer.

   Q: Well, I was having a bath, <u>wasn't I</u>? (Algeo, 1990, p. 447)

Algeo's numerous examples of aggressive tags (1988, p. 186, 1990, p. 447) mostly have I as tag subject, indicating that these tags deal with the speaker, about whom the speaker usually has more knowledge than the addressee. In fact, all Algeo's examples of aggressive tags seem to be A events (Labov & Fanshel, 1977, p. 100), i.e. the event is known by the speaker but not by the addressee. Algeo (1990) claims that aggressive tags (as well as punctuational and peremptory tags) "seem to have begun with the lower orders" (1990, p. 448) (cf. Hudson, 1975, p. 24, Cheshire, 1991, p. 66, Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1479), but that their use has spread later.

3.3 Tag questions and indexicalities

Tag questions are well suited for exploring the connection between micro-, meso and macro-social meanings, since the relationship between their functional properties (their ability to mark stance) and their propensity for indexing styles and social categories has long been recognized. Lakoff (1975, p. 15), for example, argues that tags "midway between an outright statement and a yes-no question" suggest a lack of confidence on the speaker's part. She points out that this perceived lack of confidence at the micro-social level could come to index a social type at the macrosocial level, arguing that women are

expected to use tentative forms, which simultaneously subordinates them and marks them as feminine.

Cameron, McAlinden & O'Leary (1989) point out that tag questions can be used to request information, increase an utterance's politeness, or facilitate talk. Importantly, and in contrast to Lakoff (1975), not all of these functions work to subordinate women. Cheshire (1981) attends to precisely this issue in her examination of the interplay between the grammatical composition of a tag and its function in the discourse. Examining tags relative to the wider linguistic practice of the speakers who used them, she distinguishes between tags whose content could be confirmed/disputed (because the interlocutor knew the information) and those whose content could not (because the interlocutor did not have the required knowledge). The former, which she calls "conventional tags," occurred with a wide range of verb forms, from nonstandard ain't and int to standard negated forms (e.g., '*isn't*'). In contrast, nonconventional tags occurred only with *int*. Cheshire further observes that these int tags achieved an aggressive meaning and were used predominantly by adolescents engaged in the vernacular culture. Here then, the meaning of the tag question as aggressive and/or challenging is determined not only by Cheshire's "sense" of the stance

articulated by the tag, but also by virtue of its grammatical design. This particular tag was composed using a marked nonstandard form associated with the aggressive vernacular style in which it predominantly occurs. Cheshire's (1981) work highlights our earlier point that single linguistic features like tag questions are stylistically embedded and may indeed express meaning through other linguistic features, such as the morphosyntactic forms they contain. For Cheshire, the structure of the tag (which was indexically linked to a social style) disambiguated its social meaning.

3.4 Tag questions as powerless speech or as interpreted in context

When people attend to a message meant to persuade them, they can pay attention to various aspects of the message, such as the content or length, or to factors such as the gender or race of the communicator, or the linguistic cues provided by the communicator. This last aspect is the focus. People are judged by not only what they communicate, but also how they communicate it (Ng & Bradac, 1993). People can intentionally and unintentionally employ a linguistic style that perceivers use in forming impressions and attitudes (GoVman, 1959). One's linguistic style can be so important that it not only affects the persuasiveness of an appeal, but also may be considered a

dewing feature of the person presenting the appeal (Holtgraves, 2001). For example, how fast one speaks (i.e., speech rate) affects how the communicator is perceived by the audience: those with a fast speech rate are perceived as more credible, knowledgeable, and trustworthy than those with a slow speech rate (Miller, Maruyama, Beaber, & Valone, 1976), which often leads to the message being more persuasive.

Subsequent research has found the understanding of this particular style and its effects are less than straightforward. Whereas speaking quickly has often been associated with positive perceptions of the source, using tag questions (i.e., short phrases in the form of a question that are attached to the end of a statement; e.g., don't you think? Areni, 2003) has often been associated with negative perceptions of the source. The use of tag questions can result in negative perceptions of the speaker's sociability, credibility, and trustworthiness (Hosman, 1989), as well as decreased persuasion (Holtgraves & Lasky, 1999). In fact, Ng and Bradac (1993) have asserted that tag questions are one of the three most commonly used markers of powerlessness, along with hesitations (e.g., um) and hedges (e.g., sort of). To this end, messages constructed by researchers to represent the powerless style often contain tag

questions. Although most studies suggest that individuals who use tag questions are perceived as powerless and less assertive, some literature suggests that there are situations in which tag questions are used by people in powerful positions. For example, powerful people (e.g., doctors, lawyers) may use tag questions to control the message recipient or to elicit information.

Harres (1998) found that tag question uses by medical practitioners effectively elicited information from the patient, summarized and confirmed information, and expressed empathy and feedback. Harris (1984) examined audiotapes of court trials and found that members of the court (e.g., judge, clerk, attorneys) were more likely to use tag questions than defendants, perhaps to summarize and confirm information and to demonstrate control over others. This use of tag questions is in direct contradiction to the perception of powerlessness when people of lower status use tag questions. It thus appears that certain contexts (e.g., type of the source) may influence the way in which tag questions are used and perceived, which may in turn affect the persuasiveness of the communication.

Tag questions may emphasize to people receiving the message from a non-credible source that the person is not

knowledgeable and may lack confidence or certainty that the message is correct. In an attempt to show that tag questions are indeed perceived as a cue to powerlessness, most studies have used either a source low in credibility or power (Bradac & Mulac, 1984) or sources where no information regarding credibility is provided (Blankenship & Holtgraves, 2005). No experimental work compares the persuasive effectiveness of tag questions when used by a credible versus a non-credible source. If source credibility moderates the impact of tag questions in persuasion, what process(es) underlie these effects? The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) proposes that persuasion can occur in a number of ways. An important component of the ELM is that a variable can affect persuasion in different ways as a function of the message recipient's amount of motivation and ability to think carefully about the message topic. When motivation and ability is low, variables can be persuasive by acting as a peripheral cue (i.e., by changing attitudes via a simple heuristic or association that requires little thought). When motivation and ability are high, variables can affect persuasion through more thoughtful processes (i.e., by acting as an argument, a piece of information relevant to the merits of the communication, or by biasing processing, whereby the variable

influences motivation or ability to think of the attitude object in a positive or negative way).

4 Method

4.1 Sample

The research sample consisted of a group of fifty 4th-year students of English in Hama University were chosen as a sample. Those students were males and females, who were supposed to have already attained adequate information, to some extent, to think in a reasonable manner when discussing academic affairs.

4.2 Procedures

The students chosen for the sample were told to read a test containing many examples about tag questions. Those examples were statements, each of which had a tag at the end. The students' task was to choose the appropriate interpretation for each tag mentioned in the propositions.

Choose the most appropriate interpretation of each tag question in the following propositions:

1. At the restaurant, a customer talking to the waiter:

When I ordered pizza last time, I couldn't see it, could I?

    a. hoping/fearing tag   b. disbelief

    c. aggressive   d. neutral attitude

2. A brother watching TV saying to his sister:

Tom Kruz's film is at 10:00 pm, <u>isn't it?</u>

  a. aggressive   b. scolding

  c. epistemic   d. challenging

3. A teacher asking a student about their previous knowledge:

The sun doesn't rise from the west, <u>does it?</u>

  a. peremptory   b. facilitative

  c. aggressive   d. confirmation seeking

5 Findings and data analysis

Tag questions have different interpretations that differ according to the claims made by researchers. Tag questions can be interpreted as epistemic, facilitative, softening, and challenging as stated by Holmes. Algeo distinguished five functional categories: informational, confirmatory, punctuational, peremptory, and aggressive. Algeo also sorted out tags as being aggressive tags that are insulting and provocative. 19% of women interpreted the tag in question one as an aggressive one which is shocking compared to 15% of men who managed to show right response, i.e. females tend to be more aggressive than men.

Regarding the second question, 24% of males out of the whole sample interpreted the tag question mentioned as being epistemic while only 12% of females did so. This interpretation corresponds with what Holmes stated about this kind of tags; the speaker is uncertain rather than polite. Thus, students addressed in this study applied their linguistic competence of comprehending one usage of tags as expressing uncertainty.

In the third question,12% of males were more capable of interpreting the tag as peremptory whereas only 5% of females did so. This result shows that men are more interested in obvious or universal truth than women. This type of tags is also explained by Algeo, who claimed that everyone in this category knows the truth of the preceding statement.

The following table summarizes the findings:

Tag Interpretation	Males	Females
Aggressive	12%	19%
Epistemic	24%	12%
Peremptory	12%	5%

Males and females differ in their interpretations of the tags mentioned in the questions above. Men have higher percentages than women do when interpreting epistemic and peremptory tags. Women have higher percentages than men do

when construing the aggressive attitude of tags. Aggressive tags seem to be A events (Labov & Fanshel, 1977, p. 100), i.e. the event is known by the speaker but not by the addressee. Algeo (1990) claims that aggressive tags "seem to have begun with the lower orders" (1990, p.448) (cf. Hudson, 1975, p. 24; Cheshire, 1991, p. 66, Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1479). This can be added to the speech features of females.

6 Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore an important aspect of TQs. So, TQs were defined in detail and their formal features and lexical combinations were also clarified. Many scholars, such as Holmes, Algeo, Roesle, Tottie and Hoffman, Kimps and others, dealt with the functions of TQs. A sample of students of English from Nana University were chosen to take part in providing data for this research. The results showed that there was a difference between males and females when interpreting tag questions, which that proves that gender affects the interpretations of those tags. Consequently, this study has some pedagogical implications. For example, the findings could be used as a chapter in a book talking about gender differences in speech styles and interpreting discourse. Teachers of English can benefit from the interpretations given by the participants and make use of them in classroom activities. Further research may explore the relationship between gender and TQs in natural conversation.

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