

## A Corpus-Based Analysis of Tag Questions in Jamaican English and Canadian English

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### 1. Introduction

*English is an international language, isn't it?* This type of interrogative construction, which consists of an anchor and a tag, is called a tag question (see, Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, pp.891-894). English characteristically uses “a variant tag question system” in the sense that the tag varies depending on the auxiliary and the pronoun of its anchor (Kimpes, 2007, p. 271). This study aims to describe and compare the features and use of tag questions in two varieties of English, namely, Standard Jamaican English and Canadian English, from a corpus-based approach. Standard Jamaican English (Jamaican English) refers to the English variety used by the educated population of the Jamaicans, and it is different from Jamaican Creole (see, e.g. Sand, 2004; Irvine, 2008).

### 2. Methodology

This study used the Jamaican component (ICE-JA: Rosenfelder, Jantos, Höhn & Mair, 2009) and the Canadian component (ICE-CAN: Newman & Columbus, 2010) of the International Corpus of English. By using AntConc (Anthony, 2011), all possible combinations of pronouns and auxiliaries were searched in order to extract potential tags from the corpora. For negative tags, both synthetic negation and analytic negation were considered. From the retrieved potential tags, those that were actually not tags (e.g. regular interrogatives) were eliminated. The remaining tags and their anchors were finalized as tag questions used for the analysis. As for functions, categories for classification of tag questions were developed based on previous studies (e.g. Holmes, 1995; Tottie & Hoffmann, 2006; Algeo, 2006). In this study, seven functional categories were used for classification: informational, confirmatory, facilitative, attitudinal, peremptory, aggressive, and others. Each tag question was classified into one of these categories based on the primary function in its context.

### 3. Results and Analysis

For statistical analysis, chi-square tests were conducted by using SPSS version 19. The Holm correction was applied to reduce type 1 error in case of multiple comparisons.

### *Frequency of Occurrence*

In ICE-CAN, 167 instances of tag questions were identified, while there were only 51 instances of tag questions in ICE-JA. This means that Canadian English used tag questions much more frequently than Jamaican English. In the following, the proportions expressed as percentage are indicated in order to show the results of comparative analyses.

### *Text Categories*

There are 12 text categories in each corpus, and they are further grouped into the spoken component and the written component. In ICE-JA, nearly 70% of the tag questions appeared in the spoken component. In ICE-CAN, this proportion was higher, and nearly 90% of the tag questions occurred in the spoken component. A chi-square test showed that Canadian English used tag questions significantly more frequently in spoken language than Jamaican English ( $\chi^2=18.85$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.000$ ). These varieties of English also significantly differed in terms of the distribution of tag questions across the 12 text categories ( $\chi^2=37.74$ ,  $df=8$ ,  $p=.000$ ; only the categories with at least one tag question was included). Further analyses with the Holm correction identified significant differences in the text categories of spoken private dialogues ( $\chi^2=10.79$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.001$ ) and creative writing ( $\chi^2=20.50$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.000$ ). Canadian English had tag questions significantly more frequently in spoken private dialogues than Jamaican English. On the other hand, tag questions in Jamaican English appeared significantly more frequently in creative writing than those in Canadian English.

### *Polarity*

The polarity of tag questions could be divided into four categories based on the polarity of the anchor and that of its tag: positive-negative, negative-positive, positive-positive, and negative-negative. They can also be classified into reversed polarity tag questions and constant polarity tag questions.

Figure 1 shows the comparison of the two corpora based on the four polarity types of tag questions. A chi-square test indicated that the distribution of tag questions across the polarity types significantly differed between the varieties ( $\chi^2=19.81$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p=.000$ ). Specifically, Canadian English had a significantly higher proportion of positive-negative tag questions than Jamaican English ( $\chi^2=5.85$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.016$ ). On the other hand, Jamaican English had a significantly higher proportion of positive-positive tag questions than Canadian English ( $\chi^2=19.62$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.000$ ).

Figure 2 shows the proportions of reversed polarity tag questions and constant polarity tag questions in the corpora. A chi-square test indicated that Jamaican English had a significantly higher

proportion of constant polarity tag questions than Canadian English. Although both varieties preferred reversed polarity tag questions over constant polarity tag questions, the results indicate that constant polarity tag questions are used more frequently in Jamaican English than in Canadian English.

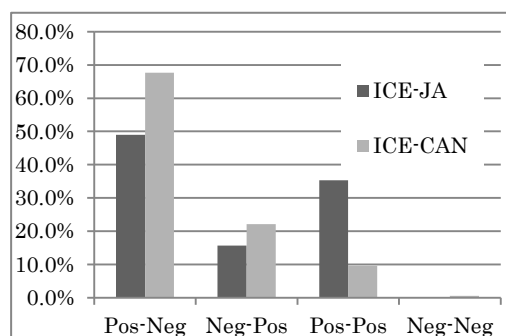


Figure 1 Polarity Types Across the Corpora

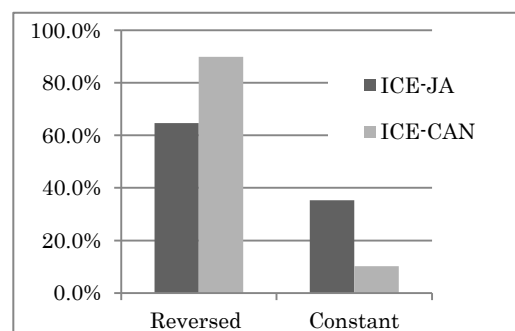


Figure 2 Reversed and Constant Polarity Tag Questions

### *Features of Tags*

Auxiliary types that occurred at least once in tags in the corpora were as follows: BE, DO, HAVE, WILL, CAN, and OUGHT. In both corpora, BE was the auxiliary type most frequently used in tags (43.1% in ICE-JA, 49.7% in ICE-CAN). DO was the second most frequent auxiliary type (39.2% in ICE-JA, 35.9% in ICE-CAN). Pronoun types that occurred at least once in tags in either of the corpora were as follows: I, We, You, He, She, They, It, and There. “It” occurred most frequently in tags in both corpora (45.1% in ICE-JA, 44.3% in ICE-CAN), followed by “You” (35.3% in ICE-JA, 23.4% in ICE-CAN). In ICE-JA, “do you,” “is it,” and “don’t you” were combinations frequently used as tags. In ICE-CAN, “isn’t it,” “doesn’t it,” “don’t you,” and “aren’t they” were combinations which occurred frequently. In both corpora, more than 90% of the tags (90.2% in ICE-JA, 95.2% in ICE-CAN) agreed with their anchor both in terms of auxiliary and pronoun.

### *Use of Tag Questions*

Among the seven functional categories of tag questions, informational, confirmatory, facilitative, and attitudinal tag questions were identified in both corpora. The other categories did not appear in neither of the corpora. In ICE-JA, facilitative tag questions were most frequent (47.1%), followed by confirmatory tag questions (33.3%), attitudinal tag questions (11.8%), and informational tag questions (7.8%). In ICE-CAN, confirmatory tag questions (42.5%) and facilitative tag questions (41.3%) occurred most frequently, followed by attitudinal tag questions (14.4%), and informational tag questions (1.8%). A chi-square test indicated that the two varieties

did not differ significantly in the distribution of tag questions across the functional categories ( $\chi^2=5.76$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p=.124$ ).

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results indicate that tag questions in Jamaican English and Canadian English have characteristic features although the basic functions of tag questions are consistent across the varieties. Canadian English uses tag questions more frequently than Jamaican English, especially in private dialogues. Jamaican English has a significantly higher proportion of positive-positive tag questions than Canadian English, while Canadian English has a significantly higher proportion of positive-negative tag questions than Jamaican English. At the same time, features of tags are similar to each other in that the same auxiliary types and pronoun types are preferred in both varieties. The results imply that tag questions in Jamaican English have developed indigenous characteristics that are different from those in native varieties of English.

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