

Part I

Figuring out how English works

Chapter One

Interaction and grammar

Grammar focus. Tag questions

Introduction.

How closely do you pay attention to how English is used around you? For example, what do we do when we think we know something is true but we are not sure? Let us try two language awareness activities and reflect on what we find.

Awareness Activity 1.1. Listening for tag questions

You are sitting in an airport waiting for your flight to be called. Someone behind you is talking on a cell phone. You can only hear half of the conversation. Among other things you hear the following sentences:

Mom, you saw the doctor, didn't you?

Martha isn't coming with you, is she?

I'll see John at the airport, won't I?

These statements with short questions attached are called **tag questions**. They are not found much in writing, but are fairly common in social interaction and serve various purposes. Let's try an experiment to see how our reason for using a tag question can affect how we say it. Read out loud the three tag questions again. First follow condition 1 below, then condition 2. Notice how the pitch of your voice musically rises or falls at the end as you say the two words in the tag. Is the tune the same in both cases?

Condition 1. You want the other person to confirm that the statement you made is true because you are not sure.

Mom, you saw the doctor, didn't you?

Martha isn't coming with you, is she?

I'll see John at the airport, won't I?

Condition 2. You are upset and are making an accusation.

Mom, you saw the doctor, didn't you?

Martha isn't coming with you, is she?

I'll see John at the airport, won't I?

In the first condition when you were not sure of yourself, did the musical pitch of your voice go up on the second word of the tag, much as it would if the tag was standing alone as a question? In the second condition when you were upset and making an accusation, did it rise on the first word of the tag then fall on the second word? Say the sentences again, but this time without the question tag. Notice how the musical pitch goes up then down on the last two syllables as it did in the tag in Condition 2.

This rising and falling of your voice in musical tones as you speak is called **intonation**. We call the intonation in the tag for Condition 1, a rising intonation. The tag for Condition 2 has a rising-falling intonation. This same rising-falling intonation was also used on the statement preceding the tags. As you can see, your intonation influences the meaning associated with the grammatical pattern. This meaning is important in social interaction. Which of these two intonation

patterns would you use on a tag to indicate sarcasm? disbelief? concern? shock? anger? encouragement? Try the experiment again to find out.

Awareness Activity 1.2. Making tag questions

Let's check how well you can put question tags on statements. Supply the appropriate tags for the following statements?

1. We should eat salmon more often, _____?
2. George isn't going to be there, _____?
3. I've seen you before, _____?
4. Sarah doesn't want to come, _____?
5. Mom remembered to buy the Key Lime pie, _____?

Adding the question tags was probably fairly easy. You were probably able to do it without much thought. But did you notice how different the tags were: e.g. "shouldn't we?" "is he?" "haven't I?" "does she?" and "didn't she?" How would you explain these tags to someone having trouble learning how to speak English? To find out, let's take a look at the grammar of tag questions.

Grammar.

For someone learning English, tag questions seem unnecessarily complex. For most languages, tag questions are formed fairly easily. Simply attach a word or invariant phrase to a statement. For example, French adds the phrase *n'est-ce pas* and Chinese the word *ma* to the end of the statement. Hungarian adds the tag *ugye* to the beginning of the statement. Many languages create tag questions simply by adding the equivalent of *yes* or *no* to the end of

the sentence. Some of you may have done similar things in Awareness Activity (AA) 1.2 with tags such as the following:

1. We should eat salmon more often, eh?
2. George isn't going to be there, huh?
3. I've seen you before, no?
4. Sarah doesn't want to come, don't you think?
5. Mom remembered to buy the Key Lime pie, right?

Since these forms can be heard in street English, some English language learners adopt them since they are so much easier to learn and are similar to the pattern in their own language. However, as you read these alternatives, you probably noted that they are rather informal. English language learners need to learn the more formal standard pattern. However, since it is much more complex, many have trouble figuring out how it works. Let's take a moment to look at what they need to notice about the pattern. To help our discussion, let's look at the tags in AA 1.2 and see if we can identify some simple **rules of thumb** that are usually correct. I have put into italics the words or the parts of words that we need to pay attention to as we look for the patterns.

1. *We should* eat salmon more often, *shouldn't we?*
2. *George isn't* going to be there, *is he?*
3. *I've* seen you before, *haven't I?*
4. *Sarah doesn't* want to come, *does she?*
5. *Mom remembered* to buy the Key lime pie, *didn't she?*

What patterns did you find? Are your rules of thumb for creating tags similar to the following?

1. Usually the first word in the tag is the first auxiliary verb used in the statement. (sentences 1, 2, and 3) Auxiliary verbs are a small class of verbs that may occur with the main verb of the sentence, often specifying what are traditionally called English tenses (as in *is going* and *have seen*) or telling the advisability or likelihood (as in *should eat*). Grammarians often call an auxiliary verb that can be moved or copied to create questions, as in these tag questions, an **operator**.
2. If the verb in the statement is used by itself without an auxiliary serving as an operator, *do* is used in the tag. *Do* has to have the same tense or verb agreement ending as the verb in the statement. (sentences 4 and 5)
3. You have to switch the polarity for the tag. In other words, if the sentence is positive, the tag is negative (sentences 1, 3, and 5), if negative, the tag is positive (sentences 2 and 4).
4. The last word of the tag is a personal pronoun based on the subject of the sentence, usually the person or thing causing the action of the sentence.

Grammars that explain how English works based on how the language is being used around us are called **descriptive grammars**. Using these samples of tag questions as the base, we have been able to identify some general rules of

English that we have called **rules of thumb**. Sometimes, however, special rules apply. Take for example the tag on the following:

I'm really great, aren't I?

According to our rules of thumb, we would expect "I'm really great, amn't I?", which would probably be pronounced "I'm really great, ain't I?" When English was being standardized two centuries ago, "ain't I" was declared uneducated and was replaced in tag questions with "aren't I?", which makes no logical sense to modern users of English. The "ain't" forms are common in street English and may one day become part of the standard language. However, these exceptions to the general rules of thumb are part of the description of how English works in various contexts and need to be accounted for.

Pragmatics and discourse.

As we saw in AA 1.1, we have to know more than the grammar of tag questions if we want to use them. Since they are called tag questions, should we use them the same way that we use questions? If someone asks us tag questions, are we supposed to answer them? If so, what form should the answer take? We could decide to avoid using them since they are so complicated. However, even if we avoid using them ourselves, the people we interact with will use them for various purposes and we have to know how to react.

To answer these questions we need to expand our description of the grammar of tag questions by looking at the **discourse** structure, or the types of sentences that typically surround tag questions and then the **pragmatic** features,

or the social context of the discourse, noting such things as who is speaking and their relationship to each other, where they are, and when and why they are talking.

Tag questions are sometimes called **confirmers** as they are often used to check information that we think is true but we want to be sure. Since we are interested in how pragmatics affects the use of grammar, let's look at how these confirmers might be used in classroom management. Suppose you are a teacher in an elementary school and you take note of when you use tag questions one morning. You might use a tag question as a polite way to draw attention to information in a science experiment about the effects of gravity on different materials, saying perhaps

“This rock is a lot heavier, isn't it? “

as the students take turns lifting different things of similar size. Later you might use a tag question to encourage more discussion with

“We can think of some more differences, can't we?”

Later during an art project you might use a tag question to express an emotion, as in

“The yellow you put in your flowers makes us feel so sunny and happy, doesn't it?”

You might use a tag question to direct the actions of one of the students who is helping to clean up but is leaving the brushes on the table with

“The brushes go in the top drawer, don't they?”

As you reflect on these situations, you can see that tag questions are more than confirmers. Teachers use them to politely interact with their students. These tags allow teachers to suggest information and actions without simply imposing their will. But how are we supposed to answer these questions? What is the intonation pattern that we might expect with each? Let's take a look at the tag questions from this classroom example and see if there are any patterns we can identify.

In the science experiment where the students are lifting different objects, you would probably say the tag on

“This rock is a lot heavier, isn't it?”
with a rising-falling intonation. You might wait for the students to say “yes” to confirm the information you gave, but you might just as well continue with another statement such as “Now, let's compare it to this box.”

In the tag question you used to encourage discussion
“We can think of some more differences, can't we?”
the intonation was probably rising. Rather than expecting a yes or no answer, you would expect someone to volunteer another difference. In other words this tag question is simply directing the discussion.

The tag question with the art project
“The yellow you put in your flowers makes us feel so sunny and happy, doesn't it?”

probably has a falling intonation. Again, probably no answer is expected. Either you or the student might add a comment such as “I really like yellow flowers.”

The tag on

“The brushes go in the top drawer, don’t they?”

probably has a rising pattern as you are politely suggesting an action. This might be followed by a polite “Yes, ma’am,” but an action is the expected response.

We see then that in the classroom setting, we usually don’t use tag questions to gather information, the expected role of questions. They also aren’t used merely to confirm information that we already have. They play a key role in politely managing classroom activities as we express opinions, guide discussion, or direct the actions of our students. In these classroom examples, the falling intonation seems to be eliciting confirmation of information supplied by the teacher whereas the rising intonation seems to indicate polite encouragement for an action or for participation.

Let’s try out another example of a tag question with the two intonation patterns to see how outside the classroom the same intonation patterns may serve different purposes. Notice that in neither case does the speaker wait for an answer to the question.

Martha’s coming with you, isn’t she? (rising-falling) I told you I didn’t want to see her.

Martha’s coming with you, isn’t she? (rising) I really have missed her.

Here the rising-falling intonation is a sign of annoyance rather than a polite confirmation of facts. The rising intonation is truly asking for confirmation rather

than politely suggesting an action. Thus we see that tag questions with their rising and rising-falling intonation patterns are used for different communicative purposes in different situations.

Although tag questions play an important role both inside and outside the classroom, they are seldom seen in writing except in when the author is trying to be reader friendly and conversational. Therefore a teacher can't expect the pattern to be reinforced through reading. Since they are so common in polite interactions, teachers need to know how they work in case there are miscommunications that need to be clarified. At the least, teachers should be aware of how they are modeling the patterns to their students.

Reflections.

Some concepts.

- Language is learned through interaction in a social setting.
- Descriptive grammar is based on how speakers use the language.
- Grammatical patterns in English may not coincide with the patterns in other languages.
- Grammar terminology may be misleading when trying to understand how English works.
- Misunderstandings can result when English language learners do not realize that the same point of grammar may have different communicative purposes as the social context changes.

Some key terminology.

- **descriptive grammar**—an analysis of an language based on how it is actually used in various settings and for various purposes
- **discourse analysis**—study of the rules that govern what kinds of sentences are expected to follow each other in a given context, as in a conversation
- **intonation**—the musical rising and falling of the voice during speech
- **operator**—an auxiliary verb or a form of the verb *be* or *do* that can be moved or copied when forming such things as tag questions
- **pragmatics**—study of how context affects the meaning associated with items of grammar
- **rules of thumb**—the general rules that a language follows
- **tag question**—a statement is changed to a question by adding a questioning word or phrase to the end, e.g. isn't it? eh? right?

Rules of thumb: Basic principles for forming tag questions

1. Copy the operator and place it at the end of the statement.

Beth is coming too => Beth is coming too, is

Julio didn't like it => Julio didn't like it, did

2. If there is no operator, place *do* at the end of the statement with the same tense and verb agreement as the verb it is replacing.

John swam => John swam, did

3. Reverse the polarity in the tag (i.e. if the statement is positive, add *n't* to the operator in the tag. If the statement is negative, don't add *n't*)

Beth is coming too, is => Beth is coming too, isn't

Julio didn't like it, did => no change

John swam, did => John swam, didn't

4. Copy the subject of the statement as a pronoun and place it at the end of the tag.

Beth is coming too, isn't => Beth is coming too, isn't she.?

Julio didn't like it, did he?

John swam, didn't => John swam, didn't he?

Some reflective activities.

1. In a newspaper you find a cartoon of Count Dracula looking at the four fang marks on the neck of his lady love. The text reads "You're seeing someone else, aren't you?" What intonation pattern would you expect on the tag and why?
2. Sometimes, there is no polarity in the tag of a tag question. Suppose one of your students reports the following tag questions to you. What intonation pattern was probably used? What is being communicated by this type of tag? How should your English language learners react if such tag questions were directed towards them? Should they learn how to use them too?
 - You think you're staying with us, do you?
 - So, you're a mechanic, are you?

3. How would you explain to your students a more appropriate way to say the following? In other words, what rules of thumb have been broken? (An * before an example indicates that most native speakers would consider the sentence ungrammatical or at least unusual. A ? before an example indicates that native speakers might hesitate to use the sentence.)
- *John's coming, isn't it?
 - ?You have the tickets for the show, no?
 - *Maria really sings well, isn't she?
 - *I can have it, don't I?
4. As you are listening for tag questions, you notice the following, which seem to be tag commands. What seem to be the rules of thumb governing their creation? What is the intonation pattern? What seems to be their purpose in the conversation?
- Honey, get me the hammer, will you?
 - Keep this just between us, will you?
 - Let's go together, shall we?
5. We've seen how tag questions can be used to confirm information, direct the actions of others, promote conversation, and express opinions and emotions. They can also be used to entertain us. For example, Carly Simon sings a song with the refrain:
- You're so vain,
You probably think this song is about you,
Don't you, don't you, don't you.

- What seems to be the communicative purpose of the tag? Would you expect the tag to have a rising or a rising-falling intonation? Why?
6. How would you make a tag question for the following? Do we have to change our rules of thumb? What does this say about *is* and *has*? Are they verbs or auxiliaries? How about the rule for deciding which pronoun to use in the tag?
- He can, _____?
 - Mae has seen it already, _____?
 - Suze has a car, _____?
 - She's coming, _____?
 - He's here, _____?
 - There's someone in the other room, _____?
 - There's not much to it, _____?
7. Create examples of how tag questions might be used with a roommate or family member in the following situations. What intonation pattern would be used in the tag?
- to politely encourage (nag) them to clean up the kitchen
 - to express anger about their not cleaning up the kitchen
 - to make a humorous comment about how they are cleaning up the kitchen

Grammar detective 1. Listening for tag questions

These grammar detectives are designed so you can experience the various ways that linguists collect information about how English works so they can write

descriptive grammars. The grammar detectives should also help you become more aware of how English is being used around you.

Instructions:

1. Get six 3x5 cards. Write your name in the top right corner of each card.
2. Find a man and a woman of similar age conversing with each other. They might be in your home, at the next table in the library, in line waiting to order a sandwich, watching television, or sitting on the grass at the park. Find an inconspicuous way to eaves-drop on the conversation. On one card take note of their ages and their role relationship (e.g. friends, roommates, siblings, spouses), the setting, and the apparent reason for the conversation.
3. Listen to their conversation, taking note of tag questions.
4. When you hear a tag question, write it down on a card, noting who said it and the intonation pattern of the tag. Is it rising or rising-falling? Remember, the tags might be of the type "isn't she?" or of the type "eh?", "right?", "Don't you think so?", "o.k.?"
5. Note what immediately follows the question (a pause so the other party can answer? an additional statement by the speaker? If the listener responds, what is the form of the answer?)
6. Continue listening until you have collected **five** tag questions.
7. In class you will be placed into teams to compile your results to report to the class.
8. With your team discuss what difficulties you had collecting the tag questions. What would have made the collecting easier? Who used more tag

questions—the men or the women? What seemed to be the reason for the tag questions?

Teaching ideas.

1. **Seeing polarity.** Using multiple senses helps many students remember a grammatical pattern. Here is a way to help them visualize the polarity principle in tag questions. Take two blank notecards. On one draw a plus (+) on both sides with a marker, on the other a minus (-). With clips attach the two cards to opposite ends of a ruler. Write on the blackboard several positive and negative sentences, created either by yourself or by the students. As you read each sentence aloud, if the sentence is positive, place the ruler under the sentence with the plus under the first auxiliary verb or under the main verb if there is no auxiliary, with the minus at the end of the sentence. Turn the ruler or yardstick the other way if the sentence is negative. In each case ask the students to attach the correct tag. Watching the polarity switch on the different sentences helps many learners.
2. **Sentence grammar with cards.** Many grammar items in English are based on word order. One way to help students visualize a grammar item you are trying to explain is to have some basic sentences that you can use in several lessons, perhaps like those used in this lesson. Write each word on a separate 3x5 card in print large enough for the class to see. The sentence can then be placed on the chalk rail using the cards. Words can easily be moved around, added, or even removed to demonstrate various grammar points. For example, for tag questions, prepare extra cards to represent

subject pronouns, the negative contraction *n't*, the auxiliary verbs of your sample sentences, *did*, and a card with *do* on one side and *does* on the other. Place your cards on the rail to create a statement for the students to read. Have the students read the statement and have them tell you who is doing or did the action. Have them select the right pronoun for that person or thing and place the card with the pronoun over the word or words it is replacing. Place it over the pronoun if a pronoun is the subject of the sentence. Then have them identify the first auxiliary verb and place a card with that word over the selection. If there is no auxiliary verb and the verb is not a form of "be," place *did*, *do* or *does* over the verb as is appropriate. Then move the card placed over the auxiliary verb or the verb to the end. If necessary add a *n't* card to comply with the polarity principle, then move the pronoun card that was placed over the subject of the sentence to the end.

3. **Gossip tags.** Pictures are a useful teaching tool both for whole class and group activities. A good source of teaching pictures is advertisements in magazines. Here is an exercise to help students practice using tag questions not as questions but as a way to make comments or express opinions about other people in friendly ways. Bring to class pictures of a variety of people doing different things. Show a picture and ask class members to make an evaluative comment about what the person looks like. To make the comment more conversational, perhaps start the sentence with an attention getter such as "boy," "golly," or the like. For example, perhaps your picture shows a young man having a "bad hair day." Perhaps he is also unshaven. The

statements might be “Boy, he looks a mess” or “Boy, he needs a shave.” Then have them repeat the sentence with the appropriate tag with falling intonation. “Boy, he looks a mess, doesn’t he” or “Boy, he needs a shave, doesn’t he.” Then have them say the tag question followed by another comment to justify the evaluation. For example, “Boy, he looks a mess, doesn’t he? I wouldn’t want to see him in the morning” Or “Boy, he needs a shave, doesn’t he? He won’t get a job looking like that.” After you demonstrate the pattern to the class, give the students their own pictures and put them into pairs or small groups to practice doing the same. At the end, selected students can show their picture and share their gossip with the class.