

TAG QUESTIONS**

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The so-called 'tag' structures of English have received a lot of attention in language teaching programmes, attention that is not hard to justify when one considers the problems and anxiety they can occasion for many foreign learners. Most teachers one speaks to seem fairly willing to agree, however, that traditional treatments of the topic leave much to be desired. It happens, also, that, when considered collectively, the tags and some related phenomena have a special theoretical interest. For they constitute a field in which it seems essential to bring together insights that derive from the study of several aspects of linguistic organisation, aspects which in some recent work have been held to need distinctive kinds of descriptive category to handle. Traditional treatments have found it necessary to recognise different syntactic types (e.g. 'same polarity' and 'reversed polarity' tags) and different intonational treatments ('falling' and 'rising' tag); while the way the communicative significance of the various permutations is described normally requires reference to the expectations they signal regarding the immediately following behaviour of the other party (in the common phrase, 'What kind of answer they expect'). This last consideration places the matter squarely in the arena of recent work on the analysis of interactive discourse.

Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) treat discourse structure as a 'separate level' of linguistic organisation, set off from grammar by the same kind of discontinuity as is commonly said

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to exist between grammar and phonology: discourse categories cannot be predicted from a consideration of syntactic descriptions. One of the basic tenets of my own approach to intonation is that the categories we need to postulate to give a generalisable account of it do not map onto the categories derived from a syntactic analysis of the sentence. Both views amount to an insistence that we must separate out the variables for detailed inspection. But both depend for their justification upon our being able to show eventually how the three kinds of formal organisation postulated interlock with each other in the realisation of what common sense tells us is a unified communicative act. For the theoretician, this is a daunting enterprise. As a tentative step towards a distant theoretical goal, the present paper pretends to do no more than draw upon what we may now claim to know about the three variables and bring it to a single focus upon a single topic. In this way, I hope to explore the circumstances and the effects of their interrelationship. And since the topic has a generally recognised pedagogical interest, I shall hope that the exercise will be of interest to learners and teachers. Even if it does not provide a ready-to-use solution to a particular set of problems, it may be of help in getting a clearer picture of what the sources of those problems are.

I shall use as my starting point a look at the relationship between intonation and grammar. It is helpful to consider a rather wider range of instances than are commonly subsumed under the term 'tag'. One way of approaching the relationship is to first identify a set of syntactically defined 'sentence types' and then to consider the effects of varying the intonational treatment of each type. So, for instance, examples like

- (1a) I've decided to buy the red one.
- (1b) Have you decided to buy the red one?
- (1c) (So...), we've decided to buy the red one?

may be taken as the base line. From here, one goes on to

examine the possibilities of associating a 'rising' or a 'falling' intonation with each, (or with some part of each). Finally, questions are posed concerning the communicative value of various combinations.

For an alternative approach, consider a different set:

- (2a) I've decided to buy the red one.
- (2b) You've decided to buy the red one?
- (2c) We've decided to buy the red one?

The distinguishing feature here is only incidentally the choice of subject pronoun. What determines the distinctive function in each of these cases is the factor that Labov discusses in his account of 'A', 'B' and 'AB' events. One way of exploring further the line that Labov opens up is to use each of these items as the initiating move in an imaginary — but I hope plausible — exchange:

	SPEAKER A	SPEAKER B	SPEAKER A
(2a)	I've decided to buy the red one*	(Oh)	
(2b)	You've decided to buy the red one	Yes	(Oh)
(2c)	We've decided to buy the red one	Yes	-

We will provisionally say that A's intention in initiating (2a) is to alter B's view of the world in some way, (i.e. he seeks to tell him something he doesn't yet know). His intention in initiating (2b), however, is to have B alter ~~his~~ view of the world by telling him something ~~he~~ (A) does not yet know: whether it is true that B has decided to buy the red one. It is not too misleading for present purposes to think of there being a transfer of information in each of these cases, and to think of the difference between them as being a matter of which direction the information moves in. If either speaker goes on to articulate the optional item we have represented as 'Oh',

* Conventional punctuation marks will be omitted from now on, since they tend to hinder the re-examination of received beliefs that I am proposing.

we can think of this as a minimal recognition of the fact that the exchange of information has taken place. (The choice of 'Oh' is fairly arbitrary: the same kind of recognition might be realised more convincingly by 'I see' in certain cases, or by one of a large number of items, but this is not important for the present argument). Notice that — importantly — there is no place for the optional addition in (2c) if we are correct in describing A's intention here as follows: he knows which he has decided to buy, he thinks he knows which B has decided to buy, and he seeks corroboration of his judgment that their world views — in so far as they affect present business — do in fact coincide. There is no 'information flow' to recognise, only assurance that the two do indeed see eye to eye.

One thing that makes the presentation of this kind of argument difficult is the impossibility of inventing declarative mood items which could ~~never~~ occur as more than one of the initiation types we have dealt with. By altering the subject pronoun we make the most of the likelihood that speakers will know about their own decisions but not about the other party's decisions, and that '(So) we ...' commonly introduces a declaration of agreement following a discussion, for instance, of the pros and cons. It's not difficult, however, to think of quite different circumstances in which any of the set might be produced, with correspondingly different intentions. And in other (and far more typical) cases, we have to accept that a specimen 'initiation', cited without context, is just not sufficient basis for ascribing to it any particular communicative intent. Thus (2d) could easily initiate any of the three exchange types we have looked at, as well as some others we shall not here take into account:

(2d) He's decided to buy the red one

Here, the analyst needs to know something that he must assume was known by the speaker — just who was privy to the third party's decision. By adopting the structural approach to the exchange, and by considering among other things the items we

have represented as **yes** and **oh**, he has a working basis for appreciating the reality of the three-way distinction to interactants, even if he lacks the evidence in a particular case to determine what the speaker's intentions are.

A number of points arise from all this that can usefully be emphasised.

1. The successful working of each of the exchange types (and of any others that an extension of the same kind of argument might lead us to recognise) depends upon the appropriate behaviour of **two** people, not one:

(i) Speaker A must act upon an assumption about who knows what that he expects Speaker B to be able to match;

(ii) Correspondingly, B must have the expected apprehension about what A's intentions are;

(iii) B must act in accordance with his interpretation of those intentions.

The discourse our apparatus is set up to describe is a co-operatively constructed article, unlike the 'sentences' with which the grammarian is concerned, and it depends always upon the operation of what Grice has called the **co-operative principle**. The observation is, of course, supported, rather than refuted, by the well-known facts that even well-intentioned co-operating conversationalists sometimes get it wrong, so that Speaker B sometimes has to say 'Are you asking me, or telling me?', and that speakers can, if they so please, refuse to co-operate.

2. The notion that the syntactically distinguished types like (1 a-c) have some kind of privileged role as primary exponents of functional types like 'statement', 'question', etc., and that events like 'declarative questions' (e.g. (2b)) are therefore in some sense 'derived' or 'indirect' exponents of what is to them an alien category, is traceable to the fact that the decontextualised sentence has so often been the focus of attention, both for the grammarian and for the language teacher and learner. For it is all too easy to give conceptual

precedence to the observation that if (1a), (1b) and (1c) are considered as a contextless set of alternatives, they seem to be explicitly marked for function. But to look at it in this way is to miss the fact that all three of the syntactic types represented can realise any of the initiation types, and can moreover realise any of the non-initiating moves our sample has included.

3. The effect of intonational treatment is captured if we associate it, not with a given range of syntactically types, but with a range of initiation types. This would be found to be true if we extended the analysis to include other exchange types than those exemplified here, and to other syntactic types. For present purposes, it is enough to say that the best basis for an examination of tag structures and their meanings is a set of initiation types which brings together the examples we have discussed as follows:

Type	A	B	A
A	I've decided to buy the red one	(Oh)	
B	You've decided to buy the red one Have you decided to buy the red one	Yes	(Oh)
C	We've decided to buy the red one (So...) we've decided to buy the red one We've decided to buy the red one, haven't we.	Yes	

It is perhaps worth saying in passing that speakers of English as a formally learned language sometimes have difficulty in making the adjustment that the above statement of the speaker-options requires. For reasons given in 2, they are likely to have developed in the course of their early contact with the language a strong disposition to think of A-type initiations and B-type initiations as being syntactically differentiated, in their picture of what 'correct' usage is. Experience suggests that they sometimes actively resist the

idea that declarative mood items regularly realise function B without benefit of any special 'questioning intonation'. As for type AB, attention to the 'world matching' conversational practice that it represents is very largely missing from elementary teaching materials, and the ability to engage in it seems often to be little developed even among otherwise highly competent speakers. An appreciation of this practice is, in fact, an essential prerequisite for a grasp of how tags work.

One further — and final — preliminary. It is sometimes possible to say with respect to a particular initiation of any type that the information content concerned is of real significance in relation to some current, real-world, business. We tell others things we think they want, or ought, to know; we ask to be informed about things we want to know ourselves. But it is a well-known fact that we often go through the motions of information-giving and information-getting for purely social reasons, so any discussion that invokes notions like 'information transfer' or 'world-changing behaviour' has to be hedged around with caution. Similarly, we may say of a particular AB initiation that it serves to establish a sharing of view-point which is to provide that basis for subsequent business. On other occasions it is equally apparent that it is doing no more than than promote social mutuality. On yet other occasions it may not be clear which of the two ends is being pursued: no-one but the participants may know, for instance, whether (2c) 'So we've decided to buy the red one' is intended to make certain they are of the same mind, before the speaker writes a cheque, or whether, spoken perhaps after the purchase has been agreed upon, it works as some kind of mutual congratulation — an expression of social togetherness which uses the prospect of their being joint owners of a red one as its occasion. A primarily social motivation may be easier to associate with some of the examples that follow.

Reversed polarity tags

Here is a sample of the ways a speaker may initiate an AB exchange:

	A	B	A
(3a)	What a lovely day	Yes	-
(3b)	Isn't it a lovely day		
(3c)	It's a lovely day		
(3d)	Lovely day		
(3e)	It's a lovely day, isn't it		

This list exhibits some of the syntactic forms that can occupy the first column. And since the purpose of this type of exchange is world-matching, it is not surprising that a very similar range of types can be found in the second column:

	A	B	A
(4a)	Thank goodness he's gone	What a bore	-
(4b)	It's a lovely day	It is, isn't it	
(4c)	It's pointless saying anything	He's hopeless	
(4d)	They're all as bad as one another	Every single one of them	

The only thing that limits what can go in the second column is the requirement that both speakers agree that it is an **existential paraphrase** of what has occurred in the first: that for present purposes, the two expressions amount to alternative realisations of the same sentiment or fact. This applies equally to the tag construction we have in (3e), and can easily repeat in

(4e)	Marvellous weather	It's a lovely day, isn't it	-
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We can, therefore, say that one function of the tag construction is to realise **either the first or the second** move

in an AB exchange.

There is no need to labour the point that the form of the tag element is almost totally predetermined. Effectively, the only meaningful decisions a speaker has to make are those concerning polarity and intonation. We must now look at the significance of these choices separately.

Notice first, the tag that operates in the AB exchange always has a reversed polarity choice. 'It's a lovely day, is it' has a quite different function. If we bring together

(3b) Isn't it a lovely day

(3e) It's a lovely day, isn't it

we can see that they have in common the use of negative polarity, not to deny the truth of a proposition, but to project an assumption that the truth of the proposition is self-evident. It so happens that neither of these examples is very likely to occur except under circumstances where such truth can be taken for granted. We can find cases resembling (3b) where the here-and-now situation determines the interpretation: if I announce that I am going for a walk, and someone says "Isn't it raining" I shall probably interpret this as an A-type initiation which seeks confirmation of what he infers from my announcement, namely that it is **not** raining. If, on the other hand, we are both walking along getting wet, the same item will be a clear invitation to agree that it self-evidently **is**. Notice that the AB interpretation is only available if the item has interrogative mood.

There is not the same choice of interpretation in the case of (3e), and it is fairly easy to see why this is the case. It provides the necessary interrogative grammar and, since it immediately follows a speaker commitment to a particular view, "It's a lovely day...", it cannot sensibly be interpreted as an enquiry about whether it is **not**!

It is, of course, consistent with what we have just said, that tags which do not reverse the polarity of the

preceding element do not function in AB exchanges. "It's a lovely day, is it" has quite different discourse implications from (3e), and represents a different type that we shall need to attend to later.

Turning now to the other variable, intonation, we must first note that we have to be concerned here not only with **pitch-movement** phenomena, as is implied by the traditional distinction 'falling/rising', but also with **termination** (see Brazil, Coulthard and Johns, 1980), a choice that we can informally associate for present purposes with **pitch level** at the tonic syllable in the tag. The account given above of the reversed polarity tag applies, in fact, only so long as the tag has both 'falling' (or proclaiming) tone and **mid termination**. We have to take into account departures from each of these in turn.

Mid termination at utterance-end regularly indicates an expectation of **concurrence**; it pre-empt's the willingness of the hearer to go along with the speaker's view of things. High termination, on the other hand, invites **adjudication**: we may say that the hearer is invited to indicate, by means of a **high-key** "yes", or its equivalent, whether he sees things that way as well. So, using the transcription conventions in Brazil, Coulthard and Johns, we may have an exchange with alternative second parts:

- | | |
|--|---|
| (5) //p it's still <u>RAIN</u> ing //p <u>ISn</u> 't it // | $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} //p \underline{YES} // (= it is) \\ //p \underline{NO} // (= it isn't) \end{array} \right.$ |
|--|---|

The fact that this particular use of the tag is seldom recognised in traditional treatments can be related to the other fact that conventional punctuation does not recognise the unity of the whole structure, in the way it does for (3e). Whereas the latter is regularly written. "It's a lovely day, isn't it?". (5) has some such representation as, "It's still raining.... Isn't it?"

Evidently this practice, based as it is upon the grammarian's intuitions about what constitutes a sentence and what does not, reflects a grammar-based definition of tags which obscures a similarity of discourse function. It is also clear that this version of the reversed polarity tag will occur as the first move in a world-matching exchange, but not as the second.

The opposite is true of the version that has low termination in second element. The function of low termination is always to close the pitch sequence. It is not easy to describe the precise communicative significance of this phonological boundary in a way which applies to all instances, but we can say that, for present purposes, it marks the finality of the second speaker's agreement. Use of the low termination tag is, perhaps, best characterised as the simultaneous expression of agreement and speaker dominance. So, in

	A	B
(6)	Lovely day	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} // \text{ p it } \underline{\text{IS}} \quad // \text{ p } \underline{\text{ISn't it}} // \\ // \text{ p it } \underline{\text{IS}} \quad // \text{ P } \underline{\text{ISn't it}} // \end{array} \right.$

the second response has implications of closing the matter that are absent from the first.

Notice that the difference between (3c) and (3e) is a matter only of whether the discourse value they share in AB exchanges is made explicit.

(3c)	It's a lovely day	Yes	-
(3e)	It's a lovely day, isn't it		

We may say that the first depends for its efficiency on Speaker B understanding A's assumptions about who knows what aright. In the second, those assumptions are left in no doubt. As we

should expect, moves like 'It's a lovely day' have the same potentiality for termination choice, and the same consequent limitation on where they occur in the exchange as the other kind:

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// p it's a LOvely DAY // : invites or articulates concurrence
// p it's a LOvely DAY // : invites adjudication (first move
                           only)
// p it's a LOvely DAY // : pitch sequence closure (second
                           move only)
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The other intonation variable is **tone**. The proclaiming tone may be replaced by a **referring** tone in either or both of the consecutive elements. Referring tone can be realised by either a 'rise' or a 'fall-rise'. Since most treatments of the tag structure seem to concentrate on the 'rise' (symbolised here by $r+$), we will assume this in all the examples. The full description provides a basis for recognising the circumstances in which R tone will be chosen in preference to $R+$, but these circumstances will not be explored at present.

I must also rely upon the familiarity of the reader with the conceptual framework that has been proposed for dealing with the meaning of choices in the proclaiming/referring system. Briefly, the opposition is related to notions of 'world-changing' and 'word-view reifying' activities. The simplest application of the idea is to A type initiations like (1a), where "I've decided to buy a red one" can be seen to function as a straightforward presentation of 'information' only if the appropriate state of understanding exists **and** if Speaker A selects proclaiming tone. The important question from our present point of view is how does the same choice affect the value of B type and AB type initiations.

To begin with (2b), both the versions

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// p you've deCIded to buy the RED one //
// r+ you've deCIded to buy the RED one //
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are possible initiations in a B type exchange. The difference

between the two can be informally captured by saying that the referring tone version presents the questions as if the answer to it had been already negotiated and seeks the other speaker's confirmation that what he is thinking is right. If the first version means something like 'Is it true, or is it not, that you have decided...?', the second can have a range of local implications like 'Am I right in believing that...', 'Did I properly understand/hear you aright...', 'Do I remember correctly, that...' etc. In many situations, the two amount to very much the same thing for all practical purposes, and the choice seems to depend upon general social considerations, which dictate an evocation of 'togetherness' or 'separateness' (This is the formal opposition that is often spoken of in relation to specific cases in terms of 'interestedness' or 'friendliness' as opposed to 'peremptoriness' or 'brusqueness', a way of approaching intonational meaning which provides endless examples of the difference between local, 'attitudinal' values and the generalisable, interactionally-conceived value that underlies them.)

If we now apply the gist of the foregoing argument to the AB type initiation:

(1c) We've decided to buy the red one Yes -

we find that it allows such an interpretation only if a proclaiming tone is chosen. With a referring tone, even an item whose grammar is strongly suggestive of a situation in which world-matching rather than world-changing would be sought, seems only to allow some such interpretation as 'I assume this is what we have decided — please tell me whether I am right'. That is to say, it initiates a B type exchange. If we keep this in mind, and then consider the effect of the polarity reversal, we arrive at a view of the whole 'structure',

// r+ We've deCIded to buy the RED one // p HAVEn't we //,

as comprising two consecutive steps in the communicative

process. The speaker first articulates his assumption about what is the understood truth of the matter, and **then** — without waiting to have it confirmed — goes on to seek concurrence about its self-evident nature. We have specified a proclaiming tone in the tag, and this makes the expectations signalled to the next speaker identical to those of the AB initiations considered earlier. There is, however, a possibility of rising tone in **both** elements. Here, the self-evident nature of the proposition is itself presented as if already negotiated, a conversational practice which is sometimes represented in print as, say

We've decided to buy the red one...., Well, **haven't** we?

There remains the possibility of proclaiming tone in the first element and referring tone in the second. The only difference between

// r+ we've deCIded to buy the RED one // r+ HAVEN't we //

// p we've deCIded to buy the RED one // r+ HAVEN't we //

is that the proposition presumed to be agreed is presented as if it were **already negotiated** in the first but as if it were a **newly introduced proposition** in the second. In both cases, however the expectations are that the speaker will endorse its self-evident nature.

One way of appreciating the fact that reversed polarity tags are always constituents of an AB type exchange, whatever their intonation, is to try to associate them with initiations that common sense says will almost certainly function in A-type or B-type contexts. "My name is John Smith" is powerfully suggestive of an A-type context, but we find nevertheless that, whatever the intonation. "My name is John Smith, isn't it" can be contextualised if we imagine it said in the (unlikely) circumstances that characterise the AB exchange: it sounds as though it is seeking to confirm already shared information, even though in the real world it would be very rare for people to want to check agreement about the initiator's name. As a

specimen that might suggest a B type context, we can take a common enquiry like "Is that the way to the station?" For any intonation treatment of "That's the way to the station, isn't it" we have to visualise the less probable situation where the speaker is checking, rather than seeking, the information.

We can summarise what has been said about reversed polarity tags and tone choice by asking how the addition of the second element alters the discourse conditions which would have been set up by the first, assuming always an AB type context:

P tone in the first element: the second element makes explicit AB implications already present in the first;

R tone in the first element: the second element converts a potential B type initiation to a certain AB type

P tone in the second element: treats the self-evident nature of the proposition as not yet negotiated;

R tone in the second element: treats it as already negotiated.

Same polarity tags

Probably, the most common occurrences of the tag which repeats the polarity of the first element, are in exchanges like:

I've decided to buy the red one	You've decided that have you	
You've decided to buy the red one	Yes	You have have you
Which have you decided on	The red one	You like the red do you

Although, in each of these cases, the last speaker is clearly doing something more than if he says "Oh", or "I see", it is equally apparent that what he says is to be regarded as a

reaction to the preceding exchange of information, rather than as **contributing** to it. Another reason for saying that these items fit in the 'Oh' column of the patterns we have examined is that they do not occur after A-B pairs. Yet another is that intonationally, they often have no **prominence** after the first element: the second is therefore presented as **non-selective**, and there is only a marginal difference between, for instance

I've deCIded to buy the RED one { you've deCIded to buy the RED one have you
you've deCIded to buy the RED one

The repetition of some part of the preceding utterance is a common exponent of the 'Oh' category.

An alternative intonation treatment seems, however, to have different implications. Consider:

Exchange 1 // p i've deCIded to buy the <u>RED</u> one //	
Exchange 2 // p you NEEd a <u>NEw</u> one // r+ <u>DO</u> you //	// p <u>YES</u> // (Oh)

This example introduces two new factors:

(i) The first element is evidently more than an existential paraphrase of the information given: it represents a provisional deduction which the speaker makes on the basis of that information;

(ii) The association of referring tone with the polarity-carrying word in the second element means that the truth of the proposition is then offered as an assumption to be confirmed.

It seems, then, that there are two, intonationally-distinguished, versions of this kind of tag which operate as reactions to a preceding information transfer and as initiators of a new (but closely related) B type exchange respectively. This correlation is almost certainly sufficiently clear-cut to be made the basis of any attention that may be given to the matter in teaching programmes. The difficulty with trying to

substantiate it as a firm truth about discourse is that data provides a lot of examples where the analyst cannot tell whether an utterance is intended as an existential paraphrase or as a deduction. This seems, moreover, to be one of the points at which misunderstandings between participants are most likely to occur, and it is likely that two people who think they are 'co-operating' may nevertheless create a discourse which differs to some extent from the perception either may have of what is presently going on.