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Tag Questions in Early and Late Modern English: Historical Description and Theoretical Implications*

1. Introduction

Tag questions are a conspicuous feature of spoken Present-day English. In contrast to many other languages, where tags are generally realized by invariant forms (e.g. *nicht wahr?* in German, *oder?* in Swiss German, or *n'est-ce pas?* in French), the canonical English question tag is a reduced interrogative clause whose structure and lexical content is conditioned by the format of the anchor – or host – clause to which it is appended.¹ It consists of a modal or an auxiliary verb, a pronoun (or *there*), and an optional negative particle (typically the enclitic *n't*). Its verb is either the operator of the anchor clause or – if no such operator is present – the dummy auxiliary DO; the pronoun is coreferential with the subject of the anchor clause. Furthermore, the polarity in the anchor clause and the tag can either be reversed (i.e. negative-positive or positive-negative) or constant (positive-positive or negative-negative). The different options are exemplified in sentences (1) to (4), which are taken from the *British National Corpus*:

| | ANCHOR | QUESTION TAG | POLARITY | |
|-----|----------------------------|--------------|----------|-----|
| (1) | You need a camera, | don't you? | POS-NEG | +/- |
| (2) | He's not American, | is he? | NEG-POS | -/+ |
| (3) | She likes her granddad, | does she? | POS-POS | +/+ |
| (4) | Yes, they don't come cheap | don't they? | NEG-NEG | -/- |

In Present-day English, reversed polarity – as in (1) and (2) – is the norm, while constant polarity tag questions – as in (3) and (4) – are virtually restricted to positive polarity tags (cf. Tottie and Hoffmann, forthcoming).²

Although tag questions can express genuine requests for information, they typically perform a whole range of additional pragmatic functions in conversation. For example, 'punctuational tags' are employed to emphasize what the speaker says and do not expect any involvement or reply by the conversational partner. As a result, they often occur in turn-internal position. Further pragmatic types are represented by 'confirmatory tags', which express that the speaker is unsure about what s/he says, and

* I would like to thank Gunnel Tottie and Joybrato Mukherjee for their helpful comments on a draft version of this paper.

¹ The term *canonical* is from Holmes (1983). In order to account for their communicative unity, I will refer to the combination of tag and anchor clause as tag question. When I specifically refer to the tag only, I will use the term question tag.

² Apart from declarative anchor clauses, as shown in (1) to (4), tag questions can also be appended to imperatives, interrogatives and exclamatives. Typical examples are displayed in (i) to (iii):

- (i) Imperative: Stop arguing, will you!
- (ii) Interrogative: Can we join you, can we?
- (iii) Exclamative: Oh what a mess everywhere, isn't it?

Finally, the anchor clause in tag questions can also be elliptical, as shown in (iv) and (v):

- (iv) A bit thick, isn't it?
- (v) Haven't been doing it, have you?

'peremptory' and 'aggressive tags', which are employed to close a discussion or to provoke and insult other speakers (cf. Algeo 1988, 1990). Tag questions are thus multi-functional elements in the system of spoken interaction.

English tag questions have received considerable scholarly interest (see e. g. Aijmer 1979, Algeo 1988, 1990, 2006, Allerton in press, Bublitz 1979, Cattell 1973, Cheshire 1991, Holmes 1983, Huddleston 1970, Hudson 1975, Kimps in press, McGregor 1995, Östman 1971, Stenström 1997, 2005, Stenström et al. 2002). However, while most attention has been focused on their polarity properties and pragmatics, little is known about their historical development. Studies of Shakespearean drama by Wikberg (1975) and Salmon (1987a, 1987b) reveal that tag questions existed in Elizabethan colloquial English, and Rissanen (1999, 274) states that "[t]ag questions are common throughout the Modern period". The most extensive (qualitative) description of their use in Early Modern English is presented by Ukaji (1998), whose database consists of 180 tag questions that were retrieved from a range of sixteenth and seventeenth century works of drama. Yet no studies appear to have been conducted for earlier or more recent centuries.

My purpose in the present paper is twofold. First, I will attempt to fill the descriptive gap by tracing the historical development of tag questions from their earliest attestations to the twentieth century. A large corpus of English drama containing nearly 6,000 tag questions will form the basis for this undertaking. Secondly, I will interpret my results from a theoretical perspective by comparing tag questions with discourse markers, which perform similar functions as tag questions in spoken interaction. In particular, I will try to determine whether the development of tag questions follows the principles set out in the theory of grammaticalization. As I will show, such a combination of quantitative language description and theoretical considerations highlights interesting differences in the development of discourse specific features, which may have implications for our understanding of (spoken) grammar.

2. Sources and data retrieval

Given the obvious lack of authentic data for earlier periods of English, historical linguists who are interested in features of spoken language must necessarily base their investigations on written representations of speech. For the purpose of the present paper, I make use of a large corpus of English drama that is available as part of the Chadwyck-Healey Literature Collections (<http://collections.chadwyck.co.uk/>). It contains more than 3,900 plays from a large range of different genres and covers a period of over 700 years, spanning the late thirteenth to the early twentieth century. In basing my investigation of the development and use of historical tag questions on a collection of literary works, I will thus follow the assumption that authors of English drama created dialogues for their plays that are sufficiently close to the actual speech patterns of their period in order to be used as a proxy for spoken language.

This approach raises a number of important methodological issues which would no doubt deserve a detailed discussion in a separate study. For example, differences in literary conventions of the various periods may have influenced the extent to which the reality of spoken interaction is reflected on stage. Also, authors of historical plays may choose to portray their characters as belonging to an earlier period of time by deliberately assigning conservative speech patterns to their lines. The results obtained from an analysis of a diachronic drama corpus must therefore certainly be interpreted with caution. For the purposes of the present paper, however, I will assume that such factors do not greatly influence the use of tag questions in

English drama and that my database is an adequate basis for the description of their development in English.

The Chadwyck-Healey Literature Collections can be accessed with the help of a Web-based search interface. Its query syntax is restricted to lexical searches but a number of wildcard options are offered to account for spelling variants in earlier texts. The retrieval of tag questions thus involves a search for all possible operator–pronoun combinations followed by a manual selection of relevant instances from the query result. In contrast to many other Web-based facilities, the search engine provided for accessing the *English Drama Collection* does not implement a list of stop words. As a result, a basic search string such as "is it not", which consists of three very common lexical items that would typically be ignored by search engines, can be used to retrieve all potentially relevant instances of this particular question tag.

A purely lexical search for all possible operator–pronoun combinations retrieves almost 50,000 instances. A number of structural and lexical constraints were therefore introduced which considerably reduced the overall size of the query result. For example, instances were discarded if they occurred at the beginning of a turn or if they were immediately preceded by a *wh*-pronoun (e.g. *Where is it?*). After applying these restrictions, 8,612 instances remained for closer manual analysis.

While most of these remaining sentences presented no difficulties for the categorization, a number of uncertain cases required closer attention. In order to be counted as a tag question, the retrieved instances had to conform to a relatively restricted set of formal features. Thus, I excluded constructions such as shown in (5), where the pronoun does not refer back to the subject of the preceding clause:

- (5) Me thinks were I a son again, to such a father, I should not think he liv'd too long: *Shouldst thou, Rinatus?* (J.S.: *Andromana*, 1642)³

In (5), *shouldst thou* is a question in the form of a reduced clause which is addressed to a different character on stage. A similar case is shown in (6), where the stage direction (*to Fal.*) makes it clear that *ain't I* is more than a simple question tag:

- (6) I assure you, sir, that I am the Baron Campotasso (to Fal.) *Ain't I?* (William Schwenck Gilbert: *Les brigands*, 1871)

A considerable number of instances were retrieved whose status as potential tag questions is difficult to assess without access to information about their prosodic features. Typical instances are shown in (7) and (8):

- (7) Know'st thou Zelidaura? (I fear a new Intrigue) Seen thee *hath she?* (Sir Richard Fanshawe: *To love only for love's sake*, 1670)
- (8) Echo.: ... Who the devil is he? It was only a joke.
Daunt.: A joke *was it?* well, I can't say it was a very good one. (James Kenney: *The world!*, 1808)

In both sentences, one possible interpretation is that an elliptical anchor clause is followed by a question tag (i.e. *She hath seen thee, hath she?* and *This was a joke, was it?*). However, the more likely reading is perhaps that we are dealing with instances of emphatic fronting, which in turn results in the inversion of the pronoun

³ The authorship of this play is debated, but it is sometimes ascribed to James Shirley.

and the operator. Since this ambiguity cannot be conclusively resolved, I chose to err on the side of caution and discarded sentences such as those shown in (7) and (8).⁴

Finally, only a limited amount of material was allowed to occur between anchor clause and tag. As a result, (9) and (10) were included, while (11) was discarded:

- (9) Here he is; I was sure of him; Eve and I were both sure of him. *We knew him, Eve, didn't we?*
(William Schwenck Gilbert: *Charity*, 1874)
- (10) You own it, false man, *do you?* (Arthur Murphy: *No one's enemy but his own*, 1764)
- (11) Tribe, villains that *will* have a greater fire in Hell than the rich Glutton has, and their Tongues be hotter. What sayst thou my kind partner of Fortune, *will they not*, hah! (Thomas D'Urfey: *The royalist*, 1682)

After manually discarding all irrelevant instances, the final set of data consisted of 5,899 historical tag questions.

Table 1: The Chadwyck-Healey *English Drama Collection*

| Period | N texts | estimated word-count |
|-------------|---------|----------------------|
| - 1500 | 218 | 500,000 |
| 1500 - 1549 | 42 | 300,000 |
| 1550 - 1599 | 184 | 3,000,000 |
| 1600 - 1649 | 595 | 9,250,000 |
| 1650 - 1699 | 430 | 8,000,000 |
| 1700 - 1749 | 457 | 6,000,000 |
| 1750 - 1799 | 683 | 8,250,000 |
| 1800 - 1849 | 743 | 8,500,000 |
| 1850 - 1899 | 485 | 5,750,000 |
| 1900 - | 73 | 750,000 |
| Total | 3,910 | 50,300,000 |

The quantitative description of diachronic trends requires that relative frequency counts can be calculated for different categories and periods of the corpus. Unfortunately, for the *English Drama Collection* no detailed information is available about word-counts for different periods or individual texts. However, a complete list of bibliographical information is provided which contains links to the full contents of all texts, and it is therefore possible to establish a relatively accurate estimate of the overall size of the corpus.⁵ Table 1 displays the number of texts and their estimated

⁴ I also found a considerable number of sentences with inversion of pronoun and operator after exclamations. Typical instances are shown in (vi) and (vii):

- (vi) Britt.: Don't you provoke me, I say. Is this the Trade you always intend to drive?
Mrs. Britt.: Yes, indeed, *is it*.
(Thomas Betterton: *The amorous widow*, 1670)
- (vii) Sam.: Is not your Name Crumplin?
Fain.: Ay, marry, *is it*; be mess, I shou'd know yow too!
(Susanna Centlivre: *The artifice*, 1722)

Instances with this type of inversion were of course also discarded.

⁵ The links to full texts contain information about the size of the text in kilobytes. The number of words found in a particular text can thus be correlated with its size.

word-counts in periods of 50 years (excluding stage directions and other elements that do not contain written representations of speech). Thus, the complete corpus contains approximately 50 million words, and all except the earliest two periods and the twentieth-century plays represent sizable chunks of data amounting to several million words of text.

In order to compare my findings for the historical development of tag questions with current usage, I will draw on the results presented in Tottie and Hoffmann (forthcoming), who report on tag questions in Present-day British and American English on the basis of two large spoken corpora, viz. the spoken component of the *British National Corpus* (spoken-demographic section only; *BNC-SDEM*) and the *Longman Spoken American Corpus (LSAC)*.⁶ Given the exclusively British content of the *English Drama Collection*, direct comparisons of frequencies of tag questions will be restricted to the British data.

3. Results

3.1 General development

I first present a general overview of the diachronic development of tag questions in the *English Drama Collection*. The distribution of the complete set of 5,899 tag questions over 50-year periods in the corpus is displayed in Figure 1.

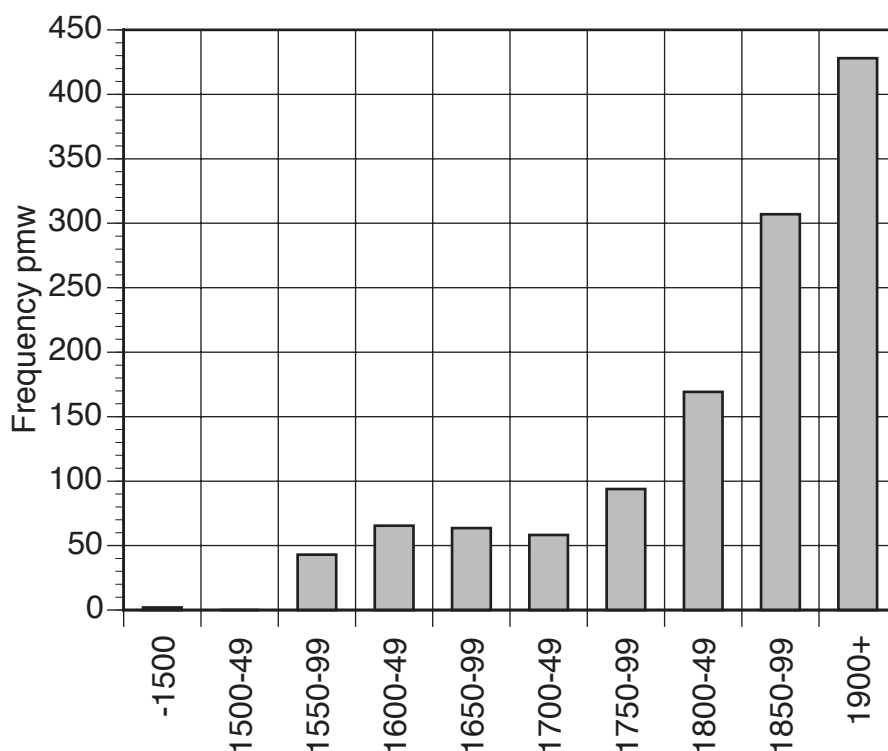


Figure 1: Tag questions in the *English Drama Collection* (frequency per million words)

Figure 1 shows that tag questions are virtually absent from the earliest periods of English drama. In fact, my search retrieved only a single instance from texts that were

⁶ See Aston and Burnard (1998) for further information about the *British National Corpus*.

written before the year 1550. The earliest tag question – dating from 1497 – is displayed in (12):

- (12) Than thay have some maner gettynge By some occupacione, *have thay?* (Henry Medwall: *Fulgens and Lucrece*, 1497)⁷

My data thus confirms the findings presented in Ukaji (1998), who quotes the same instance as earliest use of a tag question in his data. The second oldest instance in the *English Drama Collection* is found in an anonymous Tudor play (*Jacob and Esau*) which was performed in the early 1550s. A total of seven tag questions were retrieved for the time between 1550 and 1574. A further 122 instances found in plays written between 1575 and 1599 attest to the fact that canonical tag questions had become firmly established as part of the communicative system of Early Modern English by the end of the sixteenth century.

Figure 1 further shows that the use of tag questions was relatively stable for 200 years (i.e. between 1550 and 1750) but then, after 1750, dramatically increased in frequency: with 428 instances per million words (pmw), the early twentieth-century texts contain about seven times as many tag questions as Tudor and Elizabethan drama. However, this figure is still relatively low when it is compared to Present-day English spontaneous conversations as represented by the spoken-demographic component of the *British National Corpus*, where tag questions occur with a frequency of 4,383 instances pmw (Tottie and Hoffmann, forthcoming). Even though a direct comparison between spontaneous interaction and the written representation of speech in drama is problematic, it seems reasonable to interpret these figures as signs of a continued increase in the use of tag questions throughout the twentieth century rather than as a sign of changing conventions in the representation of spoken language.

3.2. Genre-specific use of tag questions

In Present-day English, tag questions are particularly common in spontaneous conversation. Thus, in the *British National Corpus*, they occur about four times more frequently in the spoken-demographic (4,383 pmw) than in the spoken context-governed part (1,017 pmw), which predominantly contains language use of a more formal nature (cf. Tottie and Hoffmann, forthcoming). It is therefore likely that the different genres covered by the *English Drama Collection* will also exhibit considerable differences in the use of historical tag questions. However, since this set of data was not compiled as a balanced and representative corpus, the genre composition of various periods may vary greatly. As a result, the frequency development displayed in Figure 1 above may be partly skewed by the overrepresentation of individual genres. Also, some genres go out of fashion (e.g. 'History', which is only found in texts dating from the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century) and new ones are established (e.g. 'Farce', first found in texts of the second half of the seventeenth century). A brief look at some major genres is therefore required to verify the validity of the findings presented in the previous subsection.

Figure 2 displays the frequency of tag questions in texts belonging to the genres 'Comedy' and 'Tragedy', which are the only two genres that are found in all

⁷ *Fulgens and Lucrece* was first printed in 1512, but probably written in the early 1490s. The bibliographical reference provided by the *English Drama Collection* states that it was first performed in 1497.

periods of Early and Late Modern English. Together, they cover about 60 per cent – approximately 30 million words – of all texts in the *English Drama Collection*.⁸

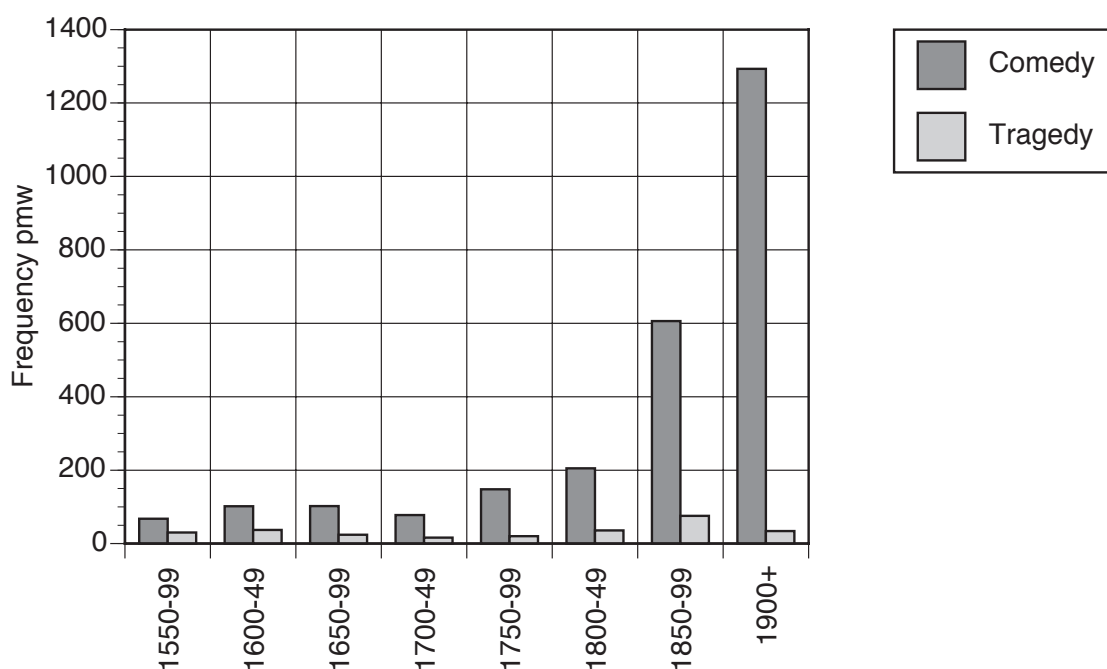


Figure 2: The frequency of tag questions in the genres 'Comedy' and 'Tragedy' (frequency per million words)

As is immediately apparent, the historical development of tag questions in these two genres is radically different. While their use in 'Tragedy' remains more or less stable at a low level, 'Comedy' exhibits an even greater increase in frequency (67 instances pmw in the sixteenth century vs. 1,293 instances pmw in early twentieth century plays) than shown for the complete *English Drama Collection* in Figure 1 above.

The third largest genre in my data carries the very general label 'Drama'; it contains approximately five million words.⁹ This genre is only represented in sufficient numbers in the three periods between 1750 and 1900, during which a six-fold increase in the frequency of tag questions can be observed (44 vs. 258 instances pmw). This genre thus matches the overall development as shown in Figure 1. Most other categories are too small to provide reliable frequency counts, but genres belonging to the area of light entertainment (e.g. 'Farce') seem to exhibit particularly high levels of increase over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In sum, with the exception of 'Tragedy', all of the larger genres contained in the *English Drama Collection* appear to conform to the general development described for the complete corpus in Section 3.1. It is thus not the case that the information contained in Figure 1 is heavily skewed by conflicting developments in various genres. Furthermore, this cross-genre comparison also shows that the correlation between formality of the language situation and the use of tag questions in spoken interaction also holds for English drama. Tragedies typically contain a large

⁸ Word-count estimates are 17.5 million words for 'Comedy' and 13 million words for 'Tragedy'.

⁹ The Chadwyck-Healey web-page does not provide further information about this category, but it appears that 'Miscellaneous' may in fact be a more appropriate label. Plays categorised as simply 'Drama' stem from a wide range of authors and periods and for example include Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*.

proportion of formal language situations, while the opposite is the case for comedies and other humorous text types.

3.3 The most frequent tag questions: diachronic development

The complete set of 5,899 tag questions retrieved from the *English Drama Collection* covers a total of 455 types of verb–pronoun combinations in tags, many of which are found in very low frequencies.¹⁰ However, the number of different types is considerably reduced (203) if spelling variants for the different pronouns and auxiliaries are normalized. The most frequent question tags are *will you?* (431 instances, 7.3%), *is it?* (359 instances, 6.1%) and *do you?* (326 instances, 5.5%). Almost half of the instances of *will you?* are found in tags that are attached to an imperative anchor clause. When only declarative anchor clauses are considered, *is it?* (357 instances, 6.4%) is most frequent, followed by *do you?* (326 instances, 6.5%) and *isn't it?* (281 instances, 5.1%).

Interestingly, the distribution of different question tag types does not change dramatically during the whole period covered by the *English Drama Collection*. This is shown in Table 2, which lists the ten most frequent question tags in the period from 1550 to 1649 and in plays written after 1850.¹¹ If full forms and contracted variants (e.g. *is it not?* and *isn't it?*) are considered equivalent, seven types retrieved from sixteenth and early seventeenth drama also rank among the most frequent question tags in the nineteenth and twentieth century data.¹²

Table 2: The most frequent question tags in the two periods 1550-1649 and after 1850 in the *English Drama Collection*

| 1550-1649 | | | after 1850 | | |
|---------------------|----|-------|------------------|-----|------|
| Question tag | N | % | Question tag | N | % |
| <i>will you</i> | 90 | 12.3% | <i>isn't it</i> | 187 | 9% |
| <i>is it not</i> | 79 | 10.8% | <i>is it</i> | 163 | 7.8% |
| <i>are you</i> | 52 | 7.1% | <i>will you</i> | 113 | 5.4% |
| <i>are you not</i> | 43 | 5.9% | <i>do you</i> | 91 | 4.4% |
| <i>is it</i> | 35 | 4.8% | <i>is it not</i> | 88 | 4.2% |
| <i>do you</i> | 33 | 4.5% | <i>won't you</i> | 72 | 3.5% |
| <i>will you not</i> | 31 | 4.2% | <i>are you</i> | 62 | 3% |
| <i>do you not</i> | 29 | 4% | <i>don't you</i> | 57 | 2.7% |
| <i>is he not</i> | 24 | 3.3% | <i>ain't it</i> | 43 | 2.1% |
| <i>did you not</i> | 21 | 2.9% | <i>have you</i> | 42 | 2% |

¹⁰ Thus, only 49 different combinations occur at least 25 times in the *English Drama Collection*.

¹¹ With only 129 tag questions, the period between 1550 and 1599 would not have formed a reliable basis for illustrating the frequencies of individual tags. I therefore decided to combine the two earliest relevant periods and compare this data with the period from 1850 onwards.

¹² These seven types are *will you?*, *is it not?*, *are you?*, *is it?*, *do you?*, *will you not?*, and *do you not?* However, Table 2 also reveals some interesting minor differences in the two time periods. For example, the proportion of *will you?* is shown to decrease by more than half from 12.3% to 5.4% of all question tags. Since *will you?* is typically appended to imperative anchor clauses, this decrease may to some extent also be a reflection of diachronic changes in the overall proportion of anchor clause types (i.e. declarative, imperative, interrogative, and exclamative).

When the data for the late 19th and early 20th century period shown in Table 2 is compared to Present-day English use in spontaneous conversation, the same kind of pictures emerges: *isn't it?* and *is it?* are also the two most frequent question tags in the spoken-demographic component of the *British National Corpus*, and considerable overlap exists for other frequent types. The only striking difference is that *isn't it?* covers a much larger proportion of question tags in spontaneous conversation, namely 20.8 per cent (Tottie and Hoffmann, forthcoming). Judging from the data presented thus far, the use of tag questions has been surprisingly constant over a long period of time. However, the findings presented in the following sub-sections will partly modify this impression.

3.4 Polarity

As already briefly stated in the introduction, reversed polarity is the norm for the Present-day English use of canonical tag questions. Tottie and Hoffmann (forthcoming) report that only eight per cent of all instances retrieved from the *British National Corpus* exhibit constant polarity, virtually all of which are of the positive-positive type.¹³ Among the reversed polarity tags, positive-negative combinations are more common than negative-positive variants (75% vs. 17% of all tag questions). Wikberg's (1975, 128-9) findings for Shakespearean plays suggest that the situation was not dramatically different in Elizabethan times. He lists a total of 44 tag questions, 33 of which (75%) are positive-negative instances. Interestingly, positive-positive tag questions are more common in Wikberg's material than the negative-positive reversed polarity type (8 vs. 3 instances). No negative constant polarity tags are found in Shakespeare's plays.

Table 3 displays the polarity types of all 5,899 tag questions in the *English Drama Collection*. As in Wikberg's data, constant polarity tags outnumber the negative-positive reversed polarity type (30% vs. 20.3%). However, with just under half of all instances, positive-negative tag questions account for a considerably smaller proportion than they do in Shakespeare's plays and Present-day English conversation.

Table 3: Polarity of tag questions in the *English Drama Collection*

| Polarity | N | % |
|----------|-------|-------|
| POS-NEG | 2,907 | 49.3% |
| NEG-POS | 1,196 | 20.3% |
| POS-POS | 1,772 | 30% |
| NEG-NEG | 24 | 0.4% |

Negative constant polarity constructions, finally, are clearly a rare phenomenon throughout the history of tag questions. In fact, their existence has occasionally been questioned (cf. Quirk et al.'s 1985, 813 statement that "[t]his type [of tag question] has not been clearly attested in actual use"). Nevertheless, with a total of 24 instances in my data, they are certainly too frequent to be dismissed. Sentences (13) to (15) exemplify the use of this rare type of tag question in different periods of English drama:

¹³ This figure is even lower for the American data, where only four per cent are constant polarity tags.

- (13) Yes, Sir, but, you see, he has not appear'd, *may not* I put up my rapier now, and go home again with my honour, *may I not?* (William Clark: *Marciano*, 1662)
- (14) You *won't*, Old Pluto, *won't you*; then, ma'am, observe! (Frederick Reynolds: *The dramatist*, 1789)
- (15) And he *wouldn't* be persuaded by the ladies, *wouldn't he?* (Frank E. Emson: *The Weller family*, 1878)

The unexpectedly low proportion of negative–positive tag constructions displayed in Table 3 can be explained when a diachronic dimension is added to the picture. Figure 3 shows the relative proportion of POS-NEG, NEG-POS and POS-POS tag questions in English drama in 50-year periods starting from the year 1550. Due to their low overall frequency, negative constant polarity tag constructions are excluded from Figure 3.

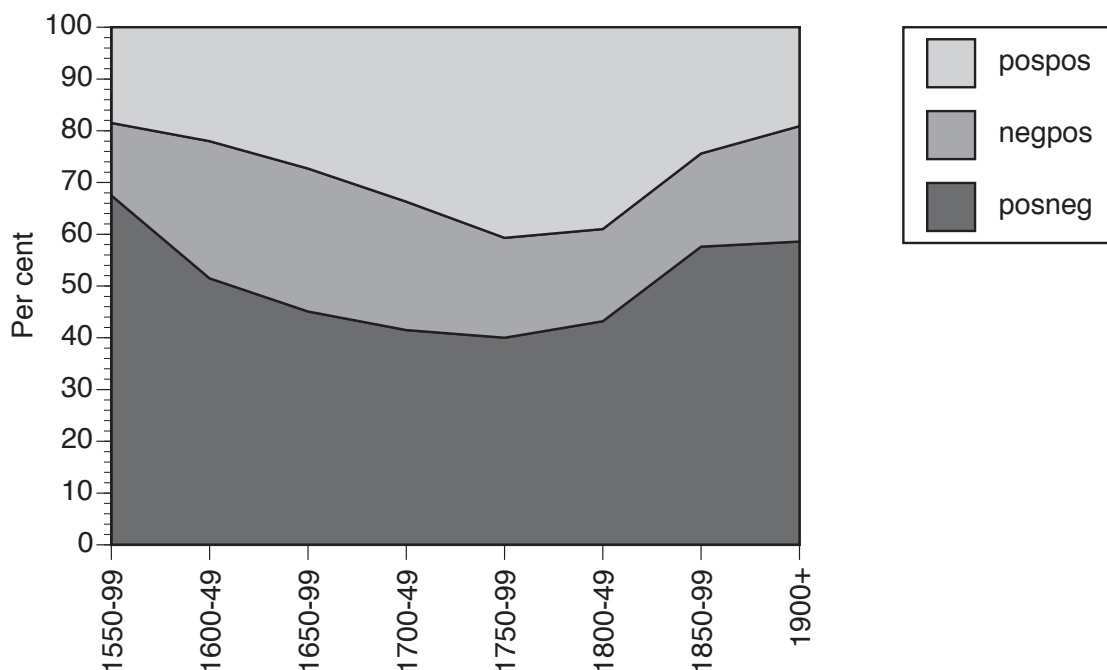


Figure 3: Proportional distribution of polarity over 50-year periods in the *English Drama Collection*

Interestingly, positive-negative tag constructions start out from a relatively high proportion of 67.5 per cent but then gradually decrease until the second half of the eighteenth century. During this period, positive-negative tag constructions are in fact even slightly less frequent than constant polarity tags (39.7% POS-NEG vs. 40.6% POS-POS). From the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards, this trend is again reversed: positive-negative tag constructions once more account for the majority of all tag questions while the proportion of constant polarity tags decreases by half. Considering the low proportion of constant polarity tags in the *British National Corpus*, this development appears to have continued during the twentieth-century. From the point of view of polarity, sixteenth-century tag questions are thus closer to Present-day English usage than any other period in between.

It is difficult to speculate about the underlying reasons for the development displayed in Figure 3. A possible explanation may be found in the different pragmatic functions performed by tag questions of the various polarity types. Thus, a closer look

at the period between 1750 and 1799 – i.e. the period where constant polarity tags are most frequent – reveals that a considerable number of constant polarity tags express an adversarial stance on the part of the speaker. Reversed polarity tags, conversely, do not exhibit this kind of attitude to the same extent. Typical examples of constant polarity tags are shown in (16) to (18):

- (16) Oh! what, you are asleep, *are you?*--- I'll waken you, with a vengeance. (Knocks with his heel.)
(Isaac Bickerstaff: *Tis well it's no worse*, 1770)
- (17) I know you, Mammon! You will tell a different tale tomorrow. *I'm* a coxcomb, *am I?* I'll punish you! (Thomas Holcroft: *Love's frailties*, 1794)
- (18) What, dost thou dare to appear before me with that serpent's tongue of thine, sloughed over with lies? You *dare to* bring your stories to me, *do you?* [shaking him violently by the collar.]
(Joanna Baillie: *The election*, 1798)

While I would be wary of equating syntactic form with pragmatic function, a certain level of correlation certainly appears to exist, at least for the second half of the eighteenth century. In Present-day English, 'aggressive' tag questions – of any polarity type – are a marginal category; they only account for one per cent of all tag questions in the spoken-demographic component of the *British National Corpus* (cf. Tottie and Hoffmann, forthcoming). It could thus be speculated that the loss of this particular pragmatic function may have contributed to a decrease in the frequency of constant polarity tags during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁴ However, only a detailed diachronic analysis of the pragmatic types of historical tag questions could reveal whether this hypothesis is indeed correct.

3.5. Negation and contraction

In Present-day English, the position of the negative particle in questions depends on the choice between the full form *not* and the enclitic *n't*. If the full form is used, it generally follows the subject (e.g. *Did he not call you?*) whereas *n't* is appended to the auxiliary (e.g. *Didn't he call you?*) and thus precedes the subject. The use of the full form is normally considered more formal than its contracted variant.¹⁵ In the sixteenth century, however, the situation was quite different. The contracted form of the negative particle was not yet available and the position of *not* in negative questions was variable between pre-subject and post-subject position.¹⁶ As a case in point, consider the two typical instances in (19) and (20):

- (19) *Will not the Ladies* be afear'd of the Lyon? (William Shakespeare: *Richard III*, 1597)
- (20) Howe like you the Ladies, *are they not* passing faire? (John Lyly: *Sapho and Phao*, 1584)

The choice between the two variants appears to have been conditioned by a number of factors, including the phonetic weight of the subject as well as its status as given or new information. Rissanen (1994, 340-1), who investigated the placement of the negative particle in questions in the Early Modern subperiod (1500 – 1570) of the

¹⁴ This explanation would still not account for the proportional increase of constant polarity tags over the first 250 years, however.

¹⁵ As Quirk et al. (1985, 809) note, "some speakers accept a third construction, also rather formal, in which the full particle is in the same position as the enclitic" and offer the sentence *Is not history a social science?* as an illustrative example. They also suggest that this apparent exception to the regular word order "may merely represent the printed equivalent of the attached enclitic".

¹⁶ Rissanen (1994), however, argues that the enclitic *n't* may have already been used in the sixteenth century.

Helsinki Corpus, concludes that "[w]hen the subject is a personal pronoun, it precedes *not* in the majority of examples".

With respect to their syntactic form, the appended clause in tag questions with POS–NEG and NEG–NEG polarity belong to the category of negative questions with pronominal subjects. However, in the sixteenth century data, the order of their individual components is much more fixed than in other types of negative questions. Thus, in virtually all occurrences of question tags the negative particle follows the subject, as shown in example (21). The only instance where *not* precedes the pronominal subject is displayed in (22).

(21) Why Iohn, thou knowest the Duke of Yorokes Funerall must be carried into England, *doest thou not?* (Anonymous (Elizabethan): *The famovs victories of Henry V*, 1583-1588)

(22) I told you, *did not I?* (John Jefferes: *The bugbears*, 1563)

In Present-day English, by contrast, negative tag questions are almost exclusively formed with the enclitic *n't* and structures such as the one shown in (22) no longer exist. Given these considerable structural changes, it is necessary to look at the development of the different variants in more detail.

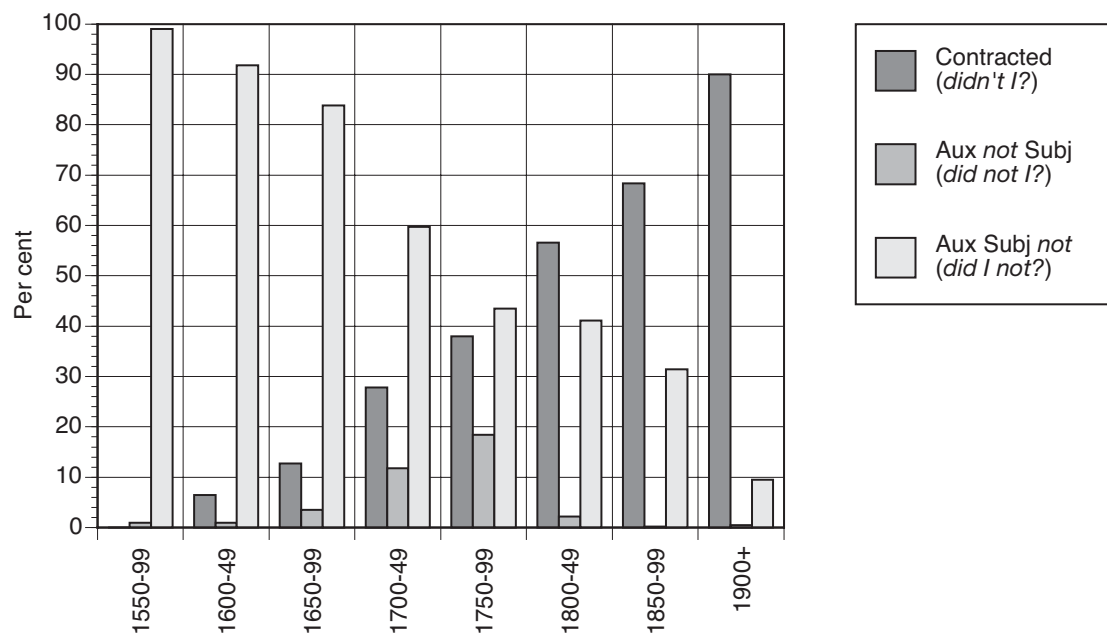


Figure 4: Proportional distribution of negative tag questions in the *English Drama Collection*

Figure 4 displays the proportions of tags containing the negative particle in pre-subject and post-subject position over 50-year periods of the *English Drama Collection*. Pre-subject position variants with an enclitic *n't* are listed separately from their full counterparts. Figure 4 shows that the earliest examples of tag questions containing the enclitic *n't* are found in the first half of the seventeenth century.¹⁷ They

¹⁷ It is difficult to give an exact date of the first occurrence of a contracted tag question. Thus, the earliest example is found in William Heming's drama *The Jewes tragedy*, which may have been performed as early as 1622 but which was only printed in 1662. The same applies to the second oldest example found in William Cartwright's *The Siedge*, which was printed in 1651 but first performed between 1628 and 1638.

then steadily increase in frequency and account for 90 per cent of all instances by the early twentieth century. As a consequence, the proportion of tags containing post-subject *not* drops from almost 100 per cent to a mere ten per cent. The third variant with pre-subject *not* only plays a marginal role. Its proportional share gradually rises until the second half of the eighteenth century but never reaches more than 18 per cent. Its frequency then drops sharply and it virtually ceases to exist as a possible variant by the second half of the nineteenth century.

The question remains whether there is a connection between the use of the uncontracted *not* in pre-subject position and its contracted variant. For example, it would not be unreasonable to assume that the uncontracted version could have paved the way for an increase in the use of enclitic *n't* in tag questions. Indeed, the earliest occurrence of the uncontracted variant predates the use of contracted forms, and once contracted forms become available, they quickly outnumber the uncontracted variants. Even so, frequencies are far too low to draw any reliable conclusions. Alternatively, it could be hypothesized that the full variant is simply the written representation of the contracted form in spoken language. However, this interpretation does not receive strong support from my data. If this were indeed the case, it would perhaps not be very likely that authors would employ both variants in the same text. Yet, of the 77 texts containing an uncontracted *not* in pre-subject position, 21 also contain at least one instance of a contracted tag question. Furthermore, other uses of the enclitic *n't* can be found in all except three of these 77 files, which suggests that authors would clearly have had the choice of opting for a contracted variant of tag questions. It thus seems more likely that other factors – e.g. prosodic features such as stress and rhythm (cf. Brainerd 1989[1993]) – may have been a more important influence in the choice between the variants.

4. Tag questions as features of a communicative grammar

4.1. Comparing discourse markers and tag questions

In the previous section, I have given a detailed quantitative overview of the use of tag questions in English drama from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. In what follows, I will turn my attention to a discussion of the status of tag questions as part of the system of grammar. In particular, I will compare the historical development of tag questions with the establishment of discourse markers, a category which performs very similar functions in speech.

Tag questions are obviously a feature of spoken interaction. Thus, Biber et al. (1999, 211-2) state that tag questions account for approximately a quarter of all questions in conversation. Their frequency is much lower in 'Fiction', where they are largely restricted to the written representation of speech, and their use in 'News' and 'Academic prose' is marginal. Furthermore, their function in discourse is predominantly pragmatic and only a small proportion of all tag questions are genuine requests for information. Different types of classification exist (see for example Holmes 1983 and Algeo 1988, 2006) but all scholars point out the fact that tag questions perform a whole range of functions in conversation. For example, they can function as hedges by conveying varying degrees of uncertainty on the part of the speaker about the proposition expressed in the anchor clause (cf. Holmes 1983, 50). Furthermore, they can be indicative of the attitude of speakers towards their conversational partners by expressing solidarity or disapproval (cf. the class of 'facilitating tags' in Holmes 1983, 53 and Algeo's 1988 'peremptory' and 'aggressive' tag questions). Finally, tag questions also have discourse structuring functions, for example by indicating that the current speaker is willing to relinquish the floor.

From a discourse-pragmatic perspective, question tags are closely related to discourse markers (e.g. *well, you know, I mean*), which perform similar functions in interaction.¹⁸ Thus, one of the central features of discourse markers is to "bracket units of talk" (Schiffrin 1987, 31), i.e. they are used to structure conversation by helping both speaker and hearer in their quest for mutual understanding. In addition, discourse markers carry interpersonal functions by effecting "cooperation, sharing, or intimacy between speaker and hearer, including confirming shared assumptions, checking or expressing understanding, requesting confirmation, expressing deference, or saving face (politeness)" (Brinton 1996, 38). Since discourse markers are often grammatically optional features that typically lack semantic content, they are not usually regarded as belonging to the core syntax of a language and have even been labeled "agrammatical" (Goldberg 1980, 7, quoted in Brinton 1996, 34). Nevertheless, as several studies (e.g. Traugott 1995, Brinton, in press) have demonstrated, the historical development of discourse markers from initially free lexical items towards their final status as discourse-specific elements shares many features with the changes involved in the development of core grammatical forms. In other words, the development of discourse markers is largely in line with the processes outlined by the theory of grammaticalization. This parallel development of core syntactic and discourse-specific elements of language can have far-reaching implications for our understanding of grammar. Ultimately, it only makes sense to discuss the grammaticalization of discourse markers if we postulate the existence of a communicative grammar which underlies both spoken and written language use and which integrates an additional layer of pragmatic relationships among its core features. This is the approach taken by Traugott (1995), who discusses the development of the discourse markers *indeed, in fact* and *besides*:

The view of grammar adopted here is that it structures cognitive *and* communicative aspects of language. It encompasses not only phonology, morphosyntax and semantics but also inferences that arise out of linguistic form, in other words, linguistic pragmatics such as topicalization, deixis. (Traugott 1995, 5; emphasis in the original)

The constructions studied by Brinton (in press) and Traugott (1995) all originate from clause-internal adverbials that grammaticalize via an intermediate stage as sentence adverbials into discourse markers. As a case in point, consider the development of *in fact* as shown in (23) to (25), all taken from Traugott (1995, 9-10):

Clause-internal adverbial:

(23) It is evident *in fact* and experience that there is no such universal Judge....

Sentence adverbial:

(24) Whence comes it then, that, *in fact* the utmost a wise magistrate can propose, is, as far as possible, to make a saving game of it ... ?

Discourse marker:

(25) I should not have used the expression. *In fact*, it does not concern you-- it only concerns myself.

In contrast, question tags start their life as reduced interrogative clauses. Given the close functional parallels between these two formally very different features of spoken interaction, it is an interesting question whether or not the individual developments of discourse markers and tag questions follow the same kind of

¹⁸ There is an overabundance of other terms in use for the concept of 'discourse marker'. See Brinton (1996, 29-40) for a concise overview of previous research as well as a list of the formal characteristics and functions of discourse markers.

principles. If tag questions can indeed be shown to grammaticalize, this would lend further support to those scholars who support an expanded view of grammar. Conversely, if the development of tag questions cannot be brought in line with the concepts of grammaticalization theory, the question would then need to be asked why some core elements of a communicative grammar should follow the expected development but not others.

4.2 Grammaticalization theory and tag questions

Over the past few decades, grammaticalization theory has taken a prominent place among functionalist approaches towards explaining language change. According to Hopper and Traugott (2003, xv) grammaticalization is defined as "the change whereby lexical items and constructions come in certain linguistic contexts to serve grammatical functions and, once grammaticalized, continue to develop new grammatical functions". This change occurs as the result of language use in context. Thus, the existing structures of a language are continually adapted to meet the requirements of new discourse situations. Repeated use may lead to the conventionalization of newly introduced forms and constructions and thereby open the way to structural changes in the grammatical system of a language. A classic case of grammaticalization is *be going to*, which changes from a free lexical combination denoting spatial movement (e.g. *I am going to London*) to a marker of futurity (e.g. *I am going to like this*) (cf. Hopper and Traugott 2003, 2-3).

Table 4: Processes of grammaticalization and their relevance for *be going to*, discourse markers (DM) and tag questions (TQ)

| Process | <i>be going to</i> | DM | TQ |
|--|--------------------|----|----|
| a change from free lexical combination to a fixed (and typically indivisible) unit | + | + | ? |
| a shift from propositional to pragmatic (or procedural) meaning | + | + | + |
| subjectification (i.e. "the development of a grammatically identifiable expression of speaker belief or speaker attitude to what is said" (Traugott 1995, 32)) | + | + | + |
| semantic bleaching or attrition (i.e. loss of semantic content) | + | + | - |
| decategorialization (i.e. the loss of features that define the categorial status of the lexical items involved in grammaticalization) | + | + | - |
| generalization (i.e. use in previously incompatible contexts) | + | + | - |
| phonological erosion or attrition | + | + | + |
| layering (i.e. the co-existence of old and new functions for the same forms) | + | + | + |
| fixation (i.e. loss of syntagmatic variability) | + | - | - |
| coalescence (i.e. morphological bonding) | + | + | + |
| condensation or scope reduction (i.e. loss of syntactic scope) | + | - | - |

Grammaticalization is typically seen as a set of unidirectional, gradual processes involving a number of semantic and morphosyntactic changes. Table 4 gives an overview of some commonly accepted processes of grammaticalization and indicates whether they can be seen to apply to the development of *be going to*, discourse markers and tag questions, respectively.¹⁹ The individual processes are discussed in more detail below.

A major difference between the development of question tags and discourse markers concerns their lexical origins. As mentioned above, discourse markers typically develop out of individual clause-internal adverbials. For question tags, however, the lexical sources are fully conditioned by the syntax and lexical make-up of the anchor clause. As a result, I would like to propose that it makes little sense to claim that the question tag *is it not?* and other tags like *have I?*, *does he?* etc. developed independently of each other. Instead, it appears more likely that the tag construction as a whole – with the complete paradigm of possible lexical forms – became at some stage available to speakers of the language. Changes to the construction, such as an increased level of grammaticalization, would then affect all members of the paradigm rather than individual question tags.

Nevertheless, some of the processes listed in Table 4 also play a role in the historical development of tag questions. Perhaps the most obvious of these concerns the change from propositional to pragmatic (or procedural) meaning. Thus, the majority of the sixteenth century tag questions in the *English Drama Collection* receive an affirmative or negative reply in the following turn. It therefore appears that they are interpreted as constituting real questions.²⁰ Typical examples are shown in (24) and (25):

- (24) VVitte.: Madame stande to your promyse if I wyne I am sped, *Am I not?*
 Science.: Yea trulye.
 (Anonymous (Moralities): *The mariage of witte and science*, 1570)
- (25) Cry.: Well sir, youle see me considered, *will you not?*
 Pist.: I marry will I, why what lighter paiment can there be, then consideration.
 (Anonymous (Elizabethan): *Solyman and Perseda*, 1592)

Although only a detailed pragmatic analysis of the Early Modern English data could form the basis for a fully reliable comparison, the situation is no doubt radically different in Present-day English. Thus, in Hoffmann and Tottie's (forthcoming) data, 'informational' tag questions – i.e. tag questions that are genuine requests for information – only amounted to three per cent of all analyzed constructions whereas the overwhelming majority of instances performed a range of discourse-specific pragmatic functions, which also expressed an increased level of subjectification. Furthermore, as a concomitant of the development of these functions, neither discourse markers nor tag questions exhibit the kind of scope reduction (i.e. loss of syntactic scope) which is otherwise typical of grammaticalizing constructions.

¹⁹ For a detailed discussion of the concepts of grammaticalization theory, see for example Hopper (1991), Hopper and Traugott (2003), Lehmann (1995[1982]), and Heine et al. (1991).

²⁰ Furthermore, with almost 75 per cent of all cases, the sixteenth century data contains the highest proportion of turn-final tag questions in my data. This proportion gradually decreases over the next 200 years, but it never goes below 50 per cent.

However, it also needs to be stressed that even the sixteenth century data contains tag questions that are very close to the Present-day usage. As a case in point, consider example (26):

- (26) What, and so I should be a traitor, *should I?* Is that the care you haue of me and mine? I thanke you truely, no theres no such matter, I loue you well, but loue my selfe better... (Thomas Heywood: *Edward IV, part ii*, 1599)

In (26), the main function of the question tag is no doubt pragmatic; in fact, it is a redundant element that could in principle be deleted without having any impact on the propositional content of the utterance. Instead, it is used to underline the adversarial stance of the character using the tag. Even the sixteenth century data thus exhibits a layering of the various functions and meanings of tag questions, albeit with a different proportional distribution than in more recent data, and there is no evidence of tag questions with an exclusively interrogative meaning in any time period. If uses such as the one shown in (26) indeed developed out of originally genuine questions, this change must therefore have taken place at a very early stage. Alternatively, it could be hypothesized that tag questions were already current in colloquial spoken language before the sixteenth century. The change from question to tag would then presumably have occurred before authors began to make use of tag questions on stage.

The second process of grammaticalization which can clearly be observed in my data is phonological attrition. The proportion of contracted forms steadily rises from the sixteenth century onwards and in Present-day English virtually 100 per cent of all tag questions are formed with the enclitic *n't*. Moreover, in the course of the twentieth century, the high frequency of *isn't it?* (approximately 20 per cent of all question tags, cf. Section 3.3) led to the establishment of its reduced variant *innit*.²¹ Both developments can also be interpreted as examples of morphological bonding within the question tag.

In contrast, the concepts of semantic bleaching, decategorialization and generalization are more difficult to apply to the development of tag questions. Given that question tags fully consist of closed-class, grammatical items from the outset – i.e. an operator, a pronoun and an enclitic *n't* – their individual lexical components have very little concrete meaning that could be lost in the course of historical development. Furthermore, the categorial status of these items cannot be seen to change in any significant way over the period covered by the *English Drama Collection*, which clearly speaks against decategorialization as a viable process in the case of tag questions. Generalization, finally, typically follows a covert structural reanalysis which makes it possible to employ a construction in previously incompatible contexts (cf. the change from the spatial meaning of *be going to* to a marker of futurity). As a result of this extended range of uses, the frequency of grammaticalizing constructions usually increases. In the case of canonical tag questions, however, no such structural reanalysis can be posited.²² The dramatic increase in their frequency of use (cf. Section 3.1) must therefore be caused by different factors.

The final point in Table 4 concerns the loss of syntagmatic variability. This aspect is clearly only of marginal importance for the development of tag questions.

²¹ No instances of *innit* were found in the *English Drama Collection*.

²² It could be argued, however, that the invariant tag *innit* is a case of generalization, since it is used in contexts that are not compatible with its earlier variant *isn't it* (e.g. *Bank's usually got a window envelope innit?*)

Question tags are by definition closely attached to the anchor clause; in addition, the amount of optional intervening material varies little over time and is largely restricted to exclamations and terms of address as illustrated in (27) and (28):

- (27) Thou should'st with Argos hundred eyes, Search in the chinkes and corners round about, It cannot be but she is extant there, *ha*, is she not? (Robert Armin: *The two maids of More-Clacke*, 1609)
- (28) But you didn't, *Mirry*, did you? (Henry Thornton Craven: *Miriam's crime*, 1864)

In this respect, tag questions differ from discourse markers, which typically exhibit a considerable amount of syntactic freedom.

In sum, a relatively inconclusive picture emerges. Although it is possible to isolate some common features in the developments of discourse markers and tag questions, these parallels are hardly sufficient to warrant the claim that both types of discourse-specific items are the result of the same grammaticalization processes. Nevertheless, tag questions and discourse markers perform closely related functions in conversation and a communicative grammar should therefore be able to accommodate both types of discourse-specific features. Further diachronic research involving other features of spoken interaction is therefore needed for a more complete understanding of the principles at work in the development of such a communicative grammar.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have given a comprehensive quantitative overview of the development of tag questions in plays from their first attested instances in Early Modern English to the present day. On the basis of a large collection of English plays, it was possible to show that tag questions were fairly common by the end of the sixteenth century and then dramatically increased in frequency from about 1750 onwards. Their status as features of colloquial speech was confirmed by the fact that this increase in use was largely restricted to genres of light entertainment (e.g. 'Comedy' and 'Farce') while their use in tragedies remained infrequent throughout the period covered by my data. It was further noted that very little change can be observed with respect to the most common types of tag questions used. Thus, seven of the ten most frequent tag questions in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century data correspond to the most frequent types used in Present-day English. By contrast, considerable changes could be observed in the polarity features of tag questions over time. In particular, positive-positive tag constructions became much more frequent and even accounted for the largest group of tag questions towards the end of the eighteenth century. Their much lower share in Present-day English can be tentatively explained by changes in their pragmatic functions (e.g. loss of their function as an expression of an adversarial stance). Finally, the proportion of contracted tag questions steadily increased over the period covered (*is it not?* vs. *isn't it?*); a third variant with the unreduced negative element in pre-subject position (*is not it?*) was found to be only of marginal importance.

In the second part of my paper, I attempted to assess the status of tag questions as elements of the grammatical system of the language. For this purpose, I compared their historical development with that of discourse markers in English (e.g. *I mean*, *you know*). The basic assumption was that their shared functional properties in spoken interaction would be mirrored in parallel paths of development. More specifically, I investigated whether tag questions, like discourse markers, can be seen to follow the

principles of grammaticalization theory, which would confirm an approach that assigns both features a place in a communicative grammar. However, some of the processes involved in grammaticalization do not appear to apply to the development of tag questions. Additional research – particularly into the pragmatic aspects of historical tag questions and related discourse specific features – is therefore required to further increase our understanding of the structure and workings of spoken language.

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