IT IS A TAG QUESTION, ISN'T IT? *

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to discover the forms that tag questions can take and the functions that they fulfill when used by a group of Malaysian speakers. This study also looks into the implications of processes in second language acquisition, such as, simplification, transfer, pidginization, overgeneralization, and avoidance on the tag question structure in an institutionalized second language variety.

The methodology used to obtain data for this paper includes an oral and a written task. The written task tests the use of the tag question structure explicitly while the oral task is one in which the respondents are required to obtain and supply information.

The issue of international intelligibility and international communication will also be focused on. The question here then is whether the tag question form as employed by the group of Malaysian speakers can be classified as a Malaysian variety or is in actuality a form of pidgin.

Purpose and Scope of Study

Platt and Weber in *English in Singapore and Malaysia: Status, Features and Functions* (1980:75) claim that amongst Malaysian speakers of English, the tag question is more often than not confined to two forms:

> You check out now, is it?
> You want Carlsberg, isn't it?

This paper sets out to discover the forms that tag questions can take and the functions that they fulfill when used by Malaysian speakers. This study also looks at the issue of international intelligibility and international communication.

1. Review of Literature

The tag question, a type of yes-no question, consists of a host clause followed by a tag which is formed from a modal/auxiliary and a pronoun. A tag pronoun uses the number, person and gender of its declarative; a subject noun is first pronominalized. In cases where a declarative auxiliary exists, it becomes the tag, otherwise a do-support is added to agree in tense and number with the declarative verb. Tag questions are usually subclassified according to a specific criterion. Bublitz (1979:6), for instance, divides them on the basis of the form of the stem into those with a preceding declarative sentence, as in, "She is clever, isn't she?" and those with a preceding imperative sentence, as in, "Hand me that towel, will you?"

A different classification is suggested by Bolinger (1957:17), based on the tag itself rather than the stem, as the following illustrate:

1. Auxiliary tags
   e.g. It's good, isn't it?

2. Tentations
   e.g. He will, I suppose?

3. Imputations
   e.g. They'll attend to it later, you say?

4. Explications
   e.g. How does he like it, I wonder?

5. The intonational tag
   e.g. Says he's sorry eh?

The auxiliary tag question, which is the focus of this study can further be subdivided into four structural types:

1. Reversed tag question with positive form.
   e.g. They like you, don't they?

2. Reversed tag question with negative form.
   e.g. They don't like you, do they?

3. Direct tag question with positive form.
   e.g. You do love him, do you?

4. Direct tag question with negative form.
   e.g. You don't love him, don't you?

It is, therefore, obvious that the tag question can take on various forms. Attempts at explaining tag questions within a transformational grammar point of view include works by Kader (1981), and Cheung (1974) for Malay and Chinese respectively. Both Kader's (1981) and Cheung's (1974) studies offer proposals as to the deep structure of tag questions in Malay and Chinese respectively. Kader (1981:281) states that in Malay, a tag question is made up of a declarative sentence and a tag "bukan" (not) in sentence final position. The declarative sentence may be in the positive or negative; however, there is no reversal of polarity:

1. **Aminah pergi ke Kuala Lumpur kelmarin, bukan?**
   Aminah go to Kuala Lumpur yesterday, not?

   (Aminah went to Kuala Lumpur yesterday, didn't she?)

2. **Aminah tidak pergi ke Kuala Lumpur kelmarin, bukan?**
   Aminah not go go Kuala Lumpur yesterday, not

   (Aminah didn't go to Kuala Lumpur yesterday, did she?)

   Kader (1981:281)

Likewise, in Chinese, specifically the Cantonese dialect, a tag question is formed from a declarative sentence and a tag "ah" (particle) in sentence final position. The tag question may be of positive or negative polarity, and as in the case of tag questions in Malay, there is no reversal of polarity:

1. **Ngohdeih heui tai hei hou mh hou ah?**
   we go see movies good (neg.) good? (particle)

(Let's go to the movies, okay?)

2. **Neih mh haih behng ah?**
    You (neg.) be sick (particle)?

(You are sick, aren't you?)

Cheung (1974:329 and 336)

The rather unique feature in tag questions in Malay and Chinese, that is, the absence of the rule of polarity reversal, is of interest in this study.

2. Methodology

Two types of tasks were used to obtain the data: a natural communication task and a linguistic manipulation task. Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982: 246) define natural communication task as one where grammar rules are used subconsciously, as the focus of the task is on communicating an idea or opinion rather than on the language forms used. On the other hand, a linguistic manipulation task requires the subject to consciously focus on the rules necessary to carry out a given task, which in itself, does not fulfill any communicative function. Data for this study were obtained through a linguistic manipulation task (a translation task) and a natural communication task (an oral task). Further, a cloze test was conducted to determine the subjects' level of proficiency and the effect it has on his/her production and understanding of tag questions.

The translation task was employed to determine the effect mother tongue interference has on the production and understanding of tag questions. This task, required subjects to decode two tag questions in Bahasa Malaysia and then to encode them in English. Swain, Dumas and Naiman (1974:73) state "there are rewarding investigations to be undertaken using such techniques as elicited translation as a means of obtaining information on a speaker's competence in a second language." Even though there has been little research on the cognitive mechanisms involved in such a task, they nevertheless advocate the method. The natural communication task chosen for this study was a functional one in which a pair of subjects was required to ask for and give directions based on a given map.

Subjects of Study

The subjects chosen for this study were divided into two main groups, one made up of Malay subjects and the other of Chinese subjects. Such a division takes into account not only the fact that both groups are learning English as a second language but also considers the effect mother tongue has on the understanding and production of tag questions. The subjects ranged in age from nineteen to twenty-one. They were enrolled in local institutions of higher learning and have received at least ten years of instruction in a government or government-assisted school where the medium of instruction is Bahasa Malaysia.

A total of five groups were studied. Group 1, a Malay group, consists of twenty-three male and female science students at tertiary level who were being given intensive training in Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Mathematics and English Language at the time of data collection. These subjects were classified as 'not proficient' by their English Language teacher. Group 2 was also a Malay group made up of twenty-three male and female tertiary level science students. However, they were classified as 'proficient' students by their teacher. Group 3 consisted of twenty-six male and female 'Advanced level' students, all of whom were taking English Literature as a subject. It was thus assumed that they would be more proficient in English as compared to the other groups. Thirty male and female Chinese subjects made up group 4.

These students were pursuing a Diploma in Building Technology and have been classified as 'not proficient' by their teacher. Group 5 had thirty male and female Chinese subjects who were enrolled in a certificate course in Business studies. They were classified as 'proficient' students by their teacher.

Results of Study

A cloze test was conducted to determine the subjects' level of proficiency. The ultimate aim, however, was to study the effect that the level of proficiency had on the production and understanding of tag questions.

From the raw scores of the cloze test the mean was calculated and the results are shown in Table 1.1. (See Appendix). The five groups can, therefore, be divided into three levels of proficiency based on the mean scores:

> Level 3 (highest proficiency) - group 3
> Level 2 (average proficiency) - group 2, 4 and 5
> Level 1 (lowest proficiency) - group 1

In the translation task, the subjects were expected to do two things, that is, to decode a tag question in Bahasa Malaysia and then to encode it in English. The first question, that is, question 1 tests the use of the auxiliary "do" in a negative stem. The results are shown in Table 1.2. (See Appendix). Table 1.2 shows that the lowest score of 23% is obtained by group 1 (a Malay group). This shows that even though the task was in Malay, it did not help the Malay subjects to perform better than the Chinese subjects. The highest score of 52% was obtained by the control group, that is, group 3. A number of subjects failed to reverse the polarity and responded with "doesn't…doesn't he?", that is, 20% in group 4, 16% in group 2, 10% in group 5 and 4% in group 3. There were also subjects who employed an incorrect tag question "isn't he?", that is, 10% in group 5, 9% in group 1,4% in group 3 and in group 4. The difficulty of the translation task is reflected in the large percentage of ungrammatical responses, that is, as high as 59% in group 1.

The "do" periphrases was tested in a positive stem in question 2. The results are tabulated in Table 1.3 (See Appendix) Table 1.3 shows that the subjects performed badly 49 in this question, the highest score is 30% obtained by group 3 and this is followed by group 5-10%, group 2-9%, group 4-7% and group 1-5%. As in previous questions, a large percentage of the subjects chose to use the tag question "isn't he?", that is, 41% in group 2, 18% in group 1, 10% in groups 4 and 5, and 9% in group 3.

The final task was an oral task in which a subject B was required to draw a map based on instructions given by a subject A. Next, subject B checked the accuracy of the map he had drawn by asking questions based on the map. This task was designed to check the subjects' production of tag questions and to determine their awareness of the functions of tag questions. It was speculated that tag questions would be utilized in this activity given the fact that tag questions can function as an instrument to check information.

An analysis of the natural communication task involves a study of the transcripts of the oral interaction. Thus to make the study feasible, only a small group of subjects was chosen, that is, one pair from each of the five groups. From group 1, (a Malay group) a pair of subjects were selected at random and they were referred to as Pair 1, (see Table 1.4, P1G1 in Appendix).

Pair 1 with cloze test scores of 32 and 36 respectively, utilized the tag question structure but in Bahasa Malaysia, that is:

> B: Turn left is here, **kan**?
> B: Right side, **kan**?

The word kan is an abbreviated form of the Malay word bukan which can function as a question tag. A third tag question formed by subject B utilizes the particle "ah" rather than an auxiliary as a question tag:

> B: At the right, ah?

There was also a heavy dependence on intonation-echo questions which functioned as tag questions.

Pair 2 Group 2, with cloze test scores of 40 and 40 respectively, produced a total of 28 questions as shown in Table 1.4, P2G2 (see Appendix). Although there was a heavy dependence on the intonation-echo question type, the one tag question that was used was formed grammatically, that is:

B: Paper ... on the left, is it?

From Group 3, the most proficient pair of subjects, that is, Pair 3 was tested and the results are shown in Table 1.4, P3G3 (see Appendix). Pair 3, with cloze test scores of 60 and 64 respectively, used 13 tag questions. Seven questions were formed using the tag "is it?"/"isn't it?" and six questions were formed using the particle "ah?".

From Group 4 (a Chinese group), a pair of subjects was tested, that is, Pair 4. A tabulation of the types of questions produced by Pair 4 Group 4 is shown in Table 1.4, P4G4 (see Appendix).

Table 1.4 shows that Pair 4, with cloze test scores of 36 and 40 respectively, produced a total of 10 tag question. Six questions were formed using the particle "ah?" and four questions were formed using the tag "isn't it?".

Pair 5 was tested from group 5 (a Chinese group) a tabulation of the results obtained is shown in Table 1.4, P5G5 (see Appendix). Table 1.4 shows that Pair 5, with cloze test scores of 40 and 44 respectively, produced 3 tag questions and all of these questions were formed using the tag "is it?". As with other groups, the subjects in group 5 relied heavily on the intonation-echo question which closely resembles the tag question. Data from the oral task, indicated that the subjects showed some awareness of the functions of a tag question, for example, seeking confirmation.

However, there is a tendency to rely on tag questions formed using a particle, for example, "Go straight, ah?", and tag questions formed using the tag "is it?"/"isn't it?". There was also heavy dependence on the intonation-echo type question for seeking confirmation and was formed with a falling intonation.

Analysis and Discussion of Data

In analysing the data obtained from the translation task, two problem areas were taken into consideration, that is, the reversal of polarity and the use of auxiliary. Two variables were also taken into consideration, that is, level of proficiency and mother tongue interference.

It was found that the level of proficiency does affect one's ability to produce tag questions. In the translation task, group 3 (mean cloze test score 67) emerged with the highest score in both questions tested, whereas group 1 (mean cloze test score 36) had the lowest score in both questions. Although the task is in Bahasa Malaysia, it did not help the Malay subjects to perform better than the Chinese subjects. In other words, the level of proficiency seems to play an important role in determining the ability to produce and understand the tag question structure. Nevertheless this does not discount the importance of the influence of mother tongue interference on the subjects' production of the tag question structure. This effect of mother tongue interference is evident in the area of auxiliary usage and polarity reversal. For example, in question 1, a number of subjects, that is, 20% in group 4, 18% in group 2, 10% in group 5 and 4% in group 3, failed to reverse the polarity and responded with:

He doesn't love him, doesn't he?

The inability of the students to handle the reversal of polarity may be a result of sociolinguistic transfer and overgeneralisation, both of which are processes that occur in second language acquisition. Thus, the students' inability to reverse the polarity in the tag question may be the result of the absence of the rule of polarity reversal in the formation of tag questions in their mother tongue. In Bahasa Malaysia, a tag question consists of a declarative sentence that may be positive or negative and a question tag bukan? For example:

Dia suka berenang, bukan? (positive declarative sentence)
Dia tidak suka berenang, bukan? (negative declarative sentence)

There is thus no need to reverse the polarity of the question tag. Likewise in Chinese, a tag question is formed from a declarative sentence and a tag "ah?" in sentence final position, for example:

Ngohdeih heui tai hai hou mh hou ah?
(positive declarative sentence)
We go see movie good? (neg.)
(Let's go to the movies okay?)

Neili mh haih behng ah? (negative declarative sentence)
You (neg.) be sick (particle)?
You aren't sick, are you?

Cheng (1974:329)

Again there is no need to reverse the polarity of the question tag. Thus as a result of the process of transfer from the mother tongue and overgeneralisation the subjects failed to reverse the polarity of the question tag, which is the rule in tag question formation in Chinese and Malay. This also points to the fact that the students were not aware of the special function that a constant polarity tag question takes on, that is, that of hinting at sarcasm. Thus in comparing the tag questions utilized by Malaysian students at tertiary level with standard English tag questions, it can be seen that there is a reduction in the number of functions that a tag question can take on.

B: Turn left is here, **kan**? B: Right side, **kan**?

The word **kan** is an abbreviated form of the Malay word bukan which can be used to function as a question tag. Further, Pair 4 of Group 4 (a Chinese group) produced a total of 10 tag questions, out of which 9 questions were formed using the particle "ah?", which function as a question tag in the Chinese language. For example:

B: Paper factory, ah?

The process of transfer from the mother tongue is, therefore, clearly evident. Not only did the subjects transfer the rule of polarity reversal or rather the lack of the rule from their mother tongue to the English language, they also borrowed the question tag from their mother tongue in forming the English tag question.

The tag question utilized by the groups of Malaysian students also differed from standard English tag questions in their structure. To form a question tag in standard English, one has to copy the declarative auxiliary if it exists, otherwise a do-support is used, next the polarity has to be reversed and finally a tag pronoun using the number, person and gender of its declarative is added, for example

She isn't pretty, is she? He likes swimming, doesn't he?

However the group of Malaysian students had problems coping with this rule of auxiliary usage, and in the translation task there was a tendency to simplify the tag question structure to two forms, for example:

Question 2   He likes swimming, isn't he?

He likes swimming, is he?

Thus the findings support the claim made by Platt and Weber (1980:75) that amongst Malaysian speakers of English, the tag question is more often than not confined to two forms like the above.

The reason behind these confined structures can be found by looking at the subjects' mother tongue. In Bahasa Malaysia only one question tag is utilized, that is, bukan?. Likewise in Chinese (Cantonese) the only question tag utilized is ah?, The subjects might have therefore assumed that a similar rule existed in the formation of the English question tag. Thus through the process of simplification, where a subject avoids using a complex structure by simplifying it, as illustrated in the above examples, the subjects have arrived at the tag question structure that utilized only two question tags, that are, "isn't it?" and "is it?".

From the data obtained from the tasks "Translate the tag question" and "An oral task" several conclusions can be made. It can be concluded that one's level of proficiency does affect one's ability to produce and understand tag questions. Moreover, mother tongue interference plays a role in determining the structure of a tag question and the function that a tag question takes on. As a result of the process in second language acquisition, that is, transfer, overgeneralisation, avoidance and simplification, the tag question structure used is more often than not confined to two forms.

There is definitely a shift away from the standard tag question structure in the tag questions used by Malaysians. This shift away from the standard English can be seen as a positive process of nativisation, on the other hand it may be seen as a process of pidginization. Williams (1989), in her study, makes the observation that NIVEs have frequently been compared to pidgins, creoles, and fossilized second language learning. However, she points out that there are differences among pidgins, creoles and NIVEs. The social circumstances involved in the formation of NIVEs and pidgins differ, While NWE speakers have immigrated voluntarily or are natives to the areas they are spoken, pidgins and creoles developed in plantation settings where the people were imported to work as slaves or indentured labourers. Another difference lies in the fact that NIVEs have their origins "in a multiethnic community whose members live with a more equitable, though by no means equal distribution of power and resources, a difference which cannot be overestimated" (Williams, 1989:44). The plantation pidgins, on the other hand, faced a sharp break in linguistic tradition, that is, the learners of the pidgin could no longer use their first language to any significant extent. There is, therefore, the option to view the rather unique tag question structure used amongst Malaysian speakers of English, not as a structure that is characteristic of a pidgin but as one that is characteristic of a NIVE. As Williams (1989:40) notes "Many of the innovations found in NIVEs, particularly lexical ones, were created to meet the needs of the new sociocultural settings and cannot be construed as steps along the way towards acquisition of the NS target." The English spoken in Malaysia can be viewed, therefore, as a NIVE, in that it is a product of nativization over several generations as well as second language acquisition within each generation.

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APPENDIX

Table 1.1: The Mean and for the Cloze Test Scores

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
Mean	36.0	43.8	67.0	43.0	45.0

Table 1.2: Responses to question 1

Ali selalu memukul adiknya. Dia tidak sayang adiknya, bukan?
Ali always beats brother(his). He not love brother(his), tag?
(Ali always beats his brother. He doesn't love him, does he?)

	Group 1		Group 2		Group 3		Group 4		Group 5	
	No. of Subjects	%	No. of Subjects	%	No. of Subjects	%	No. of Subjects	%	No. of Subjects	%
doesn't ....does he	5	23	8	37	12	52	10	33	8	27
doesn't ....doesn't he	0	0	4	18	1	4	6	20	3	10
doesn't ....isn't he	2	9	0	0	1	4	1	3	3	10
did not ....did he	2	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3
Ungrammatical	13	59	10	45	9	39	13	43	14	48

Table 1.3: Responses to question 2

Ali selalu pergi ke pantai Port Dickson
Ali always go to beach Port Dickson.
Dia suka *berenang, bukan*?
He likes swImming, tag?
(Ali always goes to the beach in Port Dickson.
He likes swimming, doesn't he?)

	Group 1		Group 2		Group 3		Group 4		Group 5	
	No. of Subjects	%	No. of Subjects	%	No. of Subjects	%	No. of Subjects	%	No. of Subjects	%
Likes swimming .... doesn't he	1	5	2	9	7	30	2	7	3	10
Likes swimming.... isn't he	4	18	9	41	2	9	3	10	3	10
Likes swimming .... is he	1	5	0	0	0	0	1	3	1	3
Likes swimming .... didn't he	2	9	0	0	2	9	2	7	3	10
Ungrammatical	14	64	50	50	9	52	22	73	19	66

Table 1. 4

Question types	Number of Questions				
	P1G1	P2G2	P3G3	P4G4	P5G5
intonation-echo	14	13	13	16	11
tag (Malay)	2				
tag	1	1	13	10	3
wh (Malay)	1				
wh	1	8	2		1
yes – no	2	2		1	
alternative		3	2		1
rhetorical		1			
Total	21	28	30	26	16