

TAGGING IT THE MALAYSIAN STYLE

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from the apprehension over the intelligibility of Malaysian English, the features of tag questions produced by a group of students at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia become the interest of this paper. The paper offers a description of tag questions produced by the subjects contrasted against the tag features of standard British English. Analysis of the data gathered in a natural setting through an informant, reveals four types of Malaysian English speakers' tag questions and an indiscriminate use of the rising intonation. Fossilization is also argued to be a contributing factor to the persistent appearance of the deviant forms. The findings also become the basis for some pedagogical implications to ELT in Malaysia.

Introduction

Intelligibility is imperative to the success of communication among multilingual and multiracial Malaysians. It is increasingly significant in communication between Malaysians and foreign nationals, in which case, English usually becomes the choice. As Malaysian English is gradually gaining recognition as one of the new variety of Englishes, Malaysians have to be more aware of intelligibility. With the L1 features lavishly garnishing Malaysian English, the question of intelligibility becomes acute.

Speaking intelligibly constitutes among others the appropriate choice of vocabulary, precise language structure (syntax and morphology) and accurate pronunciation. In other words, speaking intelligibly is communicative competence, (Savignon 1983) which is essentially the ability to recognize and to produce authentic and appropriate language correctly and fluently in any social situation.

Achieving communicative competence in English is undeniably significant as English, within the Malaysian context, continues to remain important as the nation moves towards industrialization. The move implies the eminent cause for achieving intelligibility when communicating in English as more Malaysians are expected to come into contact with foreign nationals who often do not speak any of Malaysia's indigenous languages. Almost inevitably English becomes the choice. In light of this cause, the paper presents the findings of a study looking at the intonation and the forms of English tag questions among a group of Malaysians.

Purpose of Study

The study aims to describe the features of Malaysian English tag questions. Three questions are addressed with regards to the features of English tag questions produced by a group of Malaysians. The questions are:-

1. What are the forms of tag questions produced by the group of Malaysian speakers of English?
2. Are the rising and falling intonations used for conveying different meanings?
3. What are the pedagogical implications of the findings to the teaching of English tag questions to Malaysian learners of English?

The appropriate forms and the different functions of rising and falling intonations subscribe to Standard British English (SBrE) as this variety is prescribed for official purposes including the teaching of English in Malaysian schools. Hence SBrE will be referred to for comparison and discussion of the findings throughout the paper.

Literature Review

It is deemed appropriate to examine the forms and functions of tag questions according to SBrE. This can facilitate a comparison between the features of English tags among the subjects and those of SBrE.

Shortened yes-no questions following a statement are known as tag questions. A tag consists of an auxiliary (with or without the negator "not") followed by a pronoun. The choice of auxiliary, pronoun and tense depends on the forms in the clause (Leech & Svartvik 1975). The tag repeats the first auxiliary in the clause, followed by a suitable pronoun. Furthermore, the statement or clause expresses an assumption that requires a confirmation or contradiction in response to the tag question. The tag is negative if the clause is positive. Conversely, the tag is positive if the clause is negative. For example:

Clause	Tag
1. Fatimah is selling her car,	isn't she?
2. Those girls aren't here,	are they?

The intonation on the tag gives the interpretation to the listener. In speech, the falling and rising intonation of a tag indicates different meanings. If the tag is spoken with a falling tone, it indicates that the speaker is reasonably certain that his remark is correct. Hence he expects the listener to agree or to confirm with him. For example:

1. Today's Monday, isn't it?
2. She's adorable, isn't she?

In addition, the falling tone also suggests that the statement is obviously true. The tag is simply a polite phrase often used to initiate a conversation. In essence, the falling tone serves as a conversational technique (Allen 1954).

On the other hand, if the tag is spoken with a rising tone, the speaker tends to be less certain of his statement. The rising tag suggests that the speaker is asking for the listener's opinion. The speaker has no expectation and therefore would not be very surprised if he were to receive a contradictory reply. In short, the rising tag functions as a genuine question (Allen 1954). For example:

1. It isn't expensive, is it?
2. You can handle it, can't you?

Studies have shown that the features of Malaysian English tag questions deviate greatly from the correct form of SBrE. Tongue (1974) states that Malaysian and Singaporean speakers of English have a great tendency to reduce or simplify the correct form of tag question drastically to a single tag such as '... isn't it?' and '... is it?'. For example 'She returned the book yesterday, isn't it?' and 'At six o'clock, is it?' are consequently heard. Platt and Weber (1980: 75) support this view when they report that Singaporean as well as Malaysian speakers of English "opt for the invariant tags 'is it?' and 'isn't it?'" instead of the SBrE way of forming the tag questions. Both of the tags are spoken with a rising intonation in every situation. The researchers' finding seems to show that Malaysian speakers are generally not aware of the different purposes served by the rising and falling intonation of tag questions. For instance, the rising intonation of the tag '...is it?' is often used to obtain confirmation and also as a genuine question where the answer may be 'yes' or 'no'. In the case of the rising intonation for '...isn't it?', it appears to follow a positive statement as a tag when in essence the speaker intended it to be a straightforward question (Platt & Weber, 1980). An example is "You like Carlsberg, isn't it?".

In addition, Wong (1983:135) states and supports that the tag questions of colloquial Malaysian English are a "vastly reduced system". In effect, the tags 'isn't it' and 'is it' are used "almost interchangeably" irregardless of the grammatical features of the preceding sentences. Based on the previous findings, this paper attempts to describe the features of tag questions of a group of university students.

Methodology

Thirty Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia students, ten of whom were enrolled at the Faculty of Education and the rest at the Faculty of Economy were randomly selected. The researcher ascertained that the number of males and females was equal to ease generalizations. Students from the Faculty of Education were doing the Diploma of Education, a post-graduate programme while those from the Faculty of Economy were in their fourth year of their undergraduate study. Although students at the Faculty of Education tended to be older, both sets of subjects had generally undergone the same number of years of formal English lessons in Malaysian schools and had enrolled in some levels of proficiency English classes at the university. They also showed preference for English or tended to code switch to English when communicating among themselves. This also became the basis for their selection. All of the subjects were Chinese.

An informant, a Chinese student at the Faculty of Education, who was a member to both sets of subjects was deployed to assist in the data collection. The informant was ideal for the purpose of garnering natural unelicited data as he was either an active or a passive participant in many of their conversations. The duration of the data collection period is three months. Conversations were recorded and transcribed.

Discussion of Results

A comparison was made between the Malaysian English tag questions gathered from the subjects and the SBrE forms. The data indicate that the majority of subjects rarely used the appropriate forms of tag questions. The SBrE forms were radically reduced as asserted by Wong (1983). The form 'right?' occurred most frequently with twenty occurrences out of forty tag questions collected. This is followed by 'is it?' 'isn't it?' and 'aaa?' with ten, three, and three occurrences respectively. Below is an example of each form;

1. You have heard about the lecture, right?
2. But you're tired, is it?
3. Anyway they're not coming on Saturday, isn't it?
4. Oh, you're busy, aaa?

The tags were used without much regards to the forms or the grammatical features of the preceding clauses. For instance, in Example 1, the verb phrase of the preceding clause is 'have heard' but the tag 'right' is contrary to it. This form, as in forms of Examples 2, 3, and 4, clearly defies the SBrE forms of tag questions. The violation of the SBrE pattern is seen also in the determination of the negative or positive form of the tag. While the SBrE maintains that when the preceding clause is positive, the tag has to be negative and vice versa, the tags as used by the subjects of this study do not seem to comply with the SBrE pattern. This can be observed in Example 3 where the verb phrase in the clause takes a negative form, 'they're not' and the tag is also in a negative form, 'isn't it?' The particle 'aaa' in Example 4, was popularly used by the subjects. Its use clearly serves the function of a tag question as derived from its final position and the rising intonation complementing it. This form is alien to the SBrE forms. The likelihood is that the particle was an interference from the Li, i.e., the Chinese dialects in which the particle 'aaa' is used as a tag. Another deviation is noted in the pronoun form of the verb phrase in the tags. The pronoun 'it' is the only pronoun found in all of the tags collected. 'It' is resoundingly used without any recognition given to the subject of the preceding clause. This alligns well with Wong's (1983: 35) claim that the tag questions of colloquial Malaysian English are a 'vastly reduced system'.

The deviation in the forms of tag questions can also be found in the complete avoidance of the functions of the rising and falling intonations, The rising intonation was used by the subjects for all of their tag questions. The rising intonation was consistently used to suggest different functions such as expecting confirmation, initiating a conversation, and asking a genuine question (see examples below). The different functions of the tag questions were derived from the contexts in which they occurred. All the four forms of tags, 'right?', 'is it?', 'isn't it?', and 'aaa', were consistently accompanied by the rising intonation. It can therefore be said that the rising intonation cuts across all forms of tags used by the subjects and hence it serves as a universal function, i.e., to indicate a tag question.

Rising intonation of tag questions

1. Today we have to read for tomorrow's lecture. Puan Patma told us, right?
2. You have heard about the accident right?
3. Everyone was afraid to speak because the lecturers were sitting near us, isn't it?

Interpretation of the intonation

- To confirm
- Genuine question
- Conversational technique

In sum, the deviant forms of tag questions as gathered from the subjects can be categorized into four types of violation of the SBrE forms. First, the verb phrase of the tag conflicts the verb phrase in the main clause. Second, the SBrE polarity rule for determining the negative or positive form of the tag's verb phrase is completely ignored. Third, an additional particle 'aaa' borrowed from the L1 functions as a tag question. Fourth, the rising intonation signals a tag question of varying intentions while the falling intonation was simply unheard of in the subjects' tag questions.

Platt and Weber (1980) state that Malaysian speakers of English are generally 'ignorant' of the fact that the rising and falling intonation of tag questions indicate different interpretations. However, it is rather premature to conclude that the subjects of this study were 'ignorant' of the different interpretations of the intonations. The fact that these students had gone through formal English lessons for numerous years and had enrolled in some levels of proficiency classes at the tertiary level might have enlightened them on this aspect of the language. Hence, fossilization (Vigil & Oller 1976) which is essentially, observable syntactic and lexical errors persisting in the speech of those who have otherwise learned the language relatively well is contended to be the explanation here. The consistent appearance of the pronoun 'it' in place of other appropriate personal pronouns may well be explained by fossilization also as the subjects indicated knowledge in the appropriate use of pronouns elsewhere such as in the main clauses of their tag questions.

Platt and Weber (1980) also point out that Malaysian English speakers' tags are confined to two forms, 'is it?' and 'isn't it?' The findings of this study, however, show 'right' to occur overwhelmingly over the other forms. Hence, it can be said that within the context of this study, the Malaysian English speakers' tags are confined to four forms which are 'right?', 'is it?', 'isn't it?', and 'aaa?'

Pedagogical Implications to English Language Teaching in Malaysia

Findings of this study recrystallize the sociolinguistic nuance that makes English in Malaysia uniquely Malaysian. Although Malaysian speakers of English may understand each other perfectly, the reduced and deviant forms of tag questions with the inappropriate intonations may inevitably cause misunderstanding and anxiety when Malaysians come into contact with native and other speakers of English. In other words, those Malaysian English features could be harmful.

The deviant forms of tag questions produced by subjects of this study are only a small part of what many would refer to as 'sloppy English'. This state that Malaysian English is steering to is something to be reckoned with as it translates into the importance of raising teachers' consciousness of the features of Malaysian English. In line with the Education Ministry's stance to produce learners of English who can communicate in the second language and are internationally intelligible, it is pertinent that Malaysian English teachers take serious steps to effectively teach the appropriate forms and features of English.

Hence, in the attempts to teach the correct and appropriate forms and intonations of English tag questions, teachers could perhaps expose the students to English native speakers' conversation. This can be done through the use of audio and visual aids. For example the teacher could play a video tape which demonstrates how the native speakers of English use the appropriate forms and intonation of tag questions in a real life conversation. Authentic materials, such as television programmes like dramas, movies, and sitcoms can be used to highlight the functions and features of English tag questions.

Most importantly, teachers themselves should strive to be good models for the students. Furthermore, teachers ought to explain to their students the difference between Malaysian English features and the correct features of SBrE. The teachers should create awareness among the students concerning the rules and grammar of tag questions and the different functions that are indicated by the rising and falling intonations of tag questions. This can be achieved through clear and succinct explanation and presentation of examples.

In addition, students should be encouraged to practise the correct forms and intonations of tag questions. Here, the teachers may design grammar in context exercises through the use of drama and simulation activities. The students could be assigned into small groups to practice the grammatical items through activities suggested above.

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