

Syntactical Aspect of the Tag Questions

In modern linguistics there is a tendency to examine the sentence as a multifold syntactical unit (Олійник 2004: 101). It makes possible to consider the subject of investigation in its integrity and versatility. The usage of this approach is generally aimed at functioning this unit in the process of communication. One of the main categories that form communicative interaction is the category of questioning. The category of questioning has its own components – questions. The simplest question can be determined as the explicit request for receiving necessary information (Михайленко 2007: 124).

Traditionally grammarians single out the following types of interrogative sentences, such as general or yes/no questions, special or wh-questions, alternative and tag questions or question tags (Quirk et al. 2000: 179).

In this paper we will focus on the tag questions, because there is a lack of their researches in language and in the frame of discourse analysis. The examination of their syntactical structures will contribute to the following investigation of their discourse functions.

The object of investigation is presented by the corpus of 3000 examples taken out from the books by the following British authors: *A. Christie, A. Hailey, A. MacLean, B. Cornwell, B. Lumley, C. Barker, C. Forester, C. Spector, C. S. Lewis, D. Adams, D. Francis, E. Colfer, F. Forsyth, G. Masterton, G. N. Smith, I. Banks, I. Flemming, J.K. Rowling, J.R.R. Tolkien, R. F. Rankin and T. Pratchett.*

We apply to these authors and their texts with the aim to provide the evidence of using question tags during that period. In our paper we offer true to life instances, which can be found in existing fictional discourses.

The chronological aspect of the texts covers the period beginning with the “The Mysterious Affair at Styles” by Agatha Christie (1916) and up to the “Artemis Fowl” by Eoin Colfer (2008). Genre specification is also wide. The

books belong to such genres as fiction, fantasy, detective novel, action, prose, and horror.

During the research the following methods were used: structural analysis aimed at determination of the structures of the tag questions, comparative analysis helps to find out differences and similarities between the structures, statistic-linguistic analysis used to determine the usage of the tag questions.

Tag questions are grammatical structures in which the interrogative constituent (tag) is added to the declarative, imperative or exclamatory utterance creating an interrogative speech act, e.g.:

That United flight finally took off, didn't it? (A. Hailey)

Well, tell him to look us up tomorrow morning, will you? (A. Cristie)

And you, young man, were brought up in a Christian household, were you not? (B. Cornwell)

Those mortars of yours are more accurate when firing at less than extreme range, though, aren't they? (C. Forester)

However there are several ways of defining them. The difference between the approaches lies in the fact that some linguists do not single out question tags with exclamatory (Eastwood 1995, Marianne Celce-Murcia 1999). That is why they describe question tags as the questions, which include only declarative and imperative utterance.

We consider such opinion to be a wrong one because this type of tag questions was frequently stated in our investigation. Such exclamatory words as *what, how etc.* were used, e.g.

What a tale we have been in, Mr. Frodo, haven't we? (J.R.R. Tolkien)

What a happy ever after, eh? (R.F. Rankin)

Besides many linguists, for instance, Quirk, Рочікашвілі, Ківівялі etc back up this point of view.

Question tags belong to the sub-paradigm of the questioning category, are one of the organizers of communication and consequently the stimulator of the intercourse in modern English and can be formed according to the several models.

The second one is a negative-positive tag question, the peculiar characteristic of which is the impossibility to use the exclamatory sentence as the main component, e.g.

Let's not carry any rotting molluscs back, shall we? (B. Lumley)

You don't qualify automatically, do you? (Ch. Mieville)

You won't forget, Dad, will you, about me going back to school? (D. Francis)

Second, unbalanced, type has its both parts positive or negative. We believe that in present works little attention is paid to the status of the not-operator in tag questions. For instance, J. Eastwood (Eastwood 1995), P. A. Master (Master 2001) etc. do not mention the existence of negative unbalanced tag questions (with two negations) whereas the analysis of the corpus registered this type in discourse.

The absence of the not-operator in the main component of the positive unbalanced question tag determines the absence of the auxiliary verb in it. Though the usage of it in the interrogative constituent is obligatory, e.g.

I'll tell you why, shall I? (E. Colfer)

And that makes me feel a lot better, does it? (T. Pratchett)

So it had finally come to this, had it? (R.F. Rankin)

Negative unbalanced question tag is characterized by the presence of two not-operators. The usage of all other components is compulsory. Hence, from the point of semantics this sub-paradigm is the fullest one. Though it is the most infrequent question tag. This can be explained by the fact that the traditional English grammar prohibits the use of two negations in one sentence. But this sub-paradigm was registered in the investigated texts, e.g.

You won't go again, won't you? (J.R.R. Tolkien)

And you don't think you'll be able to use it while we're on the run, don't you? (C. S. Lewis)

You do not object, don't you? (A. Christie)

L. G. Alexander (Alexander 2006), R. Quirk (Quirk et al. 2000), M. Parrot (Parrot 2001) regard balanced question tag as the traditional and correspondingly

the most frequent one. The results of our research back up this thesis, see Table № 1. To receive these data we correlated the examples of question tags from the texts with the models that are given above. We classified them in the Table № 1 according to their structure (balanced/unbalanced).

Table № 1

**Syntactical classification of the question tags in the British discourse
(20th century)**

Type of the question tag		Number	%	Examples
Balanced	+/-	1218	52.2	<i>That must throw a few calculations out, mustn't it? (D. Adams)</i>
	-/+	608	26.0	<i>You don't have a horse, do you Starbuck? (B. Cornwell)</i>
Un-balanced	+/+	482	20.6	<i>Just allow me a moment, would you? (C. Barker)</i>
	-/-	27	1.2	<i>You won't go away, won't you? (A. Hailey)</i>
Total amount		2335	100	

The structural and quantitative analysis of the discourse ascertain that the priority belongs to the balanced structures— 1826 examples (78.2%) The unbalanced units are used in 509 examples (21.8%). Obviously positive unbalanced tag questions predominate – 20.6% while the number of negative unbalanced tags equals 1.2%.

Regular tag questions include these mentioned models. But the analysis of the discourse single out structures that do not belong to the regular tag questions and consequently form irregular sub-paradigm, e.g.:

I want the answers to those three here on my desk first thing tomorrow morning, right? (B. Lumley)

I'll contact you if I need any more dreamshit, all right? (Ch. Mieville)

Didn't trust me, huh? (R.F. Rankin)

She's just lazy, eh, girl? (D. Francis)

The irregular question tags are grammatical structures in which the non-verbal interrogative constituent is added to the declarative, imperative or

exclamatory utterance. The irregular question tags can be divided into two main categories. This division is based upon the non-verbal interrogative constituent.

To the first type belong constructions where the main component coincides with the interrogative constituent represented by the exclamation (*um, eh, er, ah, huh*), e.g.:

I don't know if anyone's thought about this,' said Peavie, 'but this could make us a bit of money. Um? (T. Pratchett)

A possession of no importance, eh, Doctor? (E. Colfer)

Sent by the Lion Himself, hey? (J. K. Rowling)

In the second type the main component coincides with the interrogative constituent represented by the exclamatory words and expressions (*right, all right, surely, ok, of course, yes, no*), e.g.

Monsieur McDermott, when you 'ave finished, perhaps we could talk together, yes? (A. Hailey)

You're in the Ethics class, right? (C. Barker)

When you open I do not want you to say that you enjoyed it, OK? (D. Adams)

One can single out the third type where the main component is represented with the exclamation and the interrogative constituent is a verbal one, e.g.:

Oh, have they? (J.R.R. Tolkien)

Oh, may I? (C.S. Lewis)

Oh, did they? (J.K. Rowling)

Despite the grammatical discrepancy of the irregular constructions we believe that they can be regarded as question tags because their semantic and pragmatic characteristics remains the same as in regular question tags.

To realize the real status of irregular question tags in discourse we picked out all these constructions and classify them according to the type of their non-verbal interrogative constituent. Besides we compare the frequency of their usage with the use of regular tag questions, see Table №2.

Usage of regular and irregular tag questions in British discourse (20th century)

Type of sub-paradigm		Number	%	Приклади
Regular	+/-	1218	40.6	<i>So hard to tell these days isn't it? (D. Adams)</i>
	-/+	608	20.3	<i>You don't believe me, do you? (B. Cornwell)</i>
	+/+	482	16	<i>This your new lady-love is it? (C. Barker)</i>
	-/-	27	0.9	<i>He never even told us, didn't he? (J.K. Rowling)</i>
Irregular	<i>um, eh, er, ah, huh</i>	326	10.9	<i>You have been trying to kill the president, eh? (R.F. Rankin)</i>
	<i>right, surely all right, ok, yes, no</i>	339	11.3	<i>There has to be six of them, OK? (T. Pratchett)</i>
Total		3000	100	

Total number of regular tag question equals 2335 units, i.e. 77.8 %; irregular tag questions – 665 (22.2%). Among regular constructions the most used are positive-negative balanced tags – 40.6 %. Other types of sub-paradigms are given in the following correlation: neg.-pos. balanced tags – 20.3%; positive unbalanced – 16%; negative unbalanced- 0.9%.

To the most frequently used irregular constructions belong tags with the exclamatory words (*right, surely all right, ok, yes, no*) – 11.3%.

To sum up we can say that on the syntactical level question tags consist of the main component and the interrogative constituent. The main component can be represented by the declarative, imperative or exclamatory utterances. The tag can be verbal or non-verbal. This feature helps to distinguish regular and irregular tag questions. Both types are divided into several sub-types. Regular constructions can be balanced (-/+; +/-) and unbalanced (+/+; -/-). Irregular type has two main representatives, interrogative constituent expressed by the exclamations (*um, eh, er, ah, huh*) and interrogative constituent expressed by the exclamatory words and phrases (*right, surely all right, ok, yes, no*).

The results of the research will be useful for further investigating pragmatic and semantic spheres of the question tags.

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Summary

This article focuses on the syntactical aspect of the tag questions. The classification based on the syntactical forms of the tag questions is proposed.