

# **The Tag Question Problem in Nigerian English Usage: Methodical Steps Out of the Gamble for Acceptability**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper identifies problems encountered by Nigerian users of Tag questions in English. The problems are accounted for by examining the disparity between the grammars of some Nigerian L1 and English. Further insight is provided by examining the semantic and pragmatics of Tag question usage in Nigeria. Thereafter, a systematic guide with practical examples is provided as a solution to the habitual gamble for acceptability.*

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## **Introduction**

One of the problem areas for users of English as a second language (EL<sub>2</sub>) in Nigeria, is in the use of Tag questions. Among the educated class (including some university teachers) who are the most generous users of the language, unacceptable and substandard usages such as examples 1 and 2 below are common:

1. You took it, isn't it (NE) = Didn't you (SBE)
2. Your parents did not permit you, Isn't it (NE) = Did they?

To the average proficient user of the language, these usages tingle the ears and call immediately for "redress" even if their "wrongs" were not deliberately hurtful.

Our concern in this paper is to check the trend by accounting for the problem, guiding the user out of the trial and error approach while adopting a systematic approach which leads to globally acceptable standard usages.

### Questions as Functional and Structural Categories in English

The term 'Question' is used in reference to one of the four functional categories of the sentence. It contrasts with three major sentence functions: statement, command, and exclamation. A question is also a grammatical category. In English the structure of a question is often inverted, (instead of the subject + Verb structure of a statement, it is auxiliary + subject). Questions which do not conform to this pattern may either commence with a question element (as in WH – Questions) or end with a question tag or with a rising intonation. A question in this structural/grammatical context is interrogative and contrasts with Imperative, Declarative, and Exclamatory sentences.

Three question categories have gained prominence in English usage. They are YES – NO Questions. WH Question, and Alternative Questions. (see Bolinger D. 1957, Quirk and Greebaum 1972, Sinclair J. 1972). The criterion for arriving at these categories is based on the type of answer expected. The YES – NO type expects 'Yes' or 'No' as answers, and the alternative – question expect one or more of the alternatives mentioned in the question. Those questions that expect a reply supplying the missing information posited by the WH – element are WH – questions.

### **The Tag Question: Aspects of Its Locutionary and Illocutionary Force**

Among the subtypes of YES – NO questions is the tag question. Using the tag question enables a language user to perform a twin act involving a locutionary act and an illocutionary act. A locutionary act is one that produces a recognizable grammatical utterance while an illocutionary act is the attempt by the speaker to accomplish some communicative purposes such as warning, cursing, requesting, promising, proclaiming and so on. (see Traugott, E. & Pratt 1980, Feldman Carol 1986). The phonology syntax and semantics of a Tag focus on the locutionary act while the pragmatics focuses on the illocutionary act.

The pragmatics and sociology of a Tag question is important for the understanding of its import because of the

nature of questions in general as explained above, and that of tags in particular as will be shown below. A tag is not always a question. It could be used to perform other acts like inviting, warning, and so on.

### **Identifying the Tag in a Tag Question**

The ‘tag’ is usually a question appendage encoded at the end of an assertion to indicate an option of either acceptance (YES) or refusal (NO) of the same. In the YES – NO questions below the underlined appendage is the tag in each case.

3. You heard him, didn’t you?
4. We ought to reply oughtn’t we?

The initial part of the question as exemplified above is usually in the form of a declarative statement preceding the ‘tag’.

### **The Structure of the Tag**

The tag usually consists of an auxiliary Verb and a pronominal subject. The subject (pronoun) is often preceded by a negative particle or followed by a full negative particle. The auxiliary (usually occurring initially) is a repetition of the first auxiliary (operator) of the verb phrase. Our earlier example above where ought is repeated shows this structure. And so do these examples below:

5. Mary is beautiful, isn’t she?
6. The reptiles are disgusting, aren’t they?
7. The page can present the ring, can’t he?

Where the declarative statement does not have an auxiliary verb. A *DO* is introduced to function as the operator in the succeeding Tag question. This is exemplified in example 3 above. Other examples are:

8. Egwuono loves her fiancé, doesn’t she?
9. Yorubas eat amala, don’t they?
10. the porter submitted the keys, didn’t he?

In all our examples, (3,8,9,10) a lexical verb is used to the exclusion of an auxiliary. Since the structure of the English language Tag does not admit a lexical verb, a DO is introduced and used in conformity with the rules of subject verb concord and the person case system of the English clause. The resultant forms are do/does/did as used above.

The pronominal subject of the tag is usually a repetition of the pronoun subject or pronominal subject substitute of the antecedent statement. Earlier examples which also show this are 5,6,7.

Mary	she
The reptiles	they
The page	he

The negative particle used is NOT. When the full form is used, it occurs after the subject as in these examples.

		<u>Aux</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>Neg. Part.</u>
11.	He came here	did	he	not?
12.	They rigged the elections,	did	they	not?
13.	It is money politics	is	it	not?
14.	The president knows about it,	does	he	not?

The structure of the question in English shows that it is variable. To this extent, English is unlike French whose tag question is invariable. French ‘n’ est – ce pas’ (is it not so?) and German ‘nicht wahr’ are used regardless of the auxiliary verb employed in the statement preceding the tag. There is no such stereotype tag word or other grammatical unit by which a tag is introduced to a statement to form a tag question.

The structure of the English tag question reflects four main functional types of which YES – NO answers are expected. These are:

- i. Positive assumption is presented with neutral expectation. The addressee therefore is expected to answer YES or NO.
- ii. Negative assumption is presented with neutral expectation. The addressee should answer “YES” or NO’.

- iii. Positive assumption plus positive expectation. The expected answer is “ YES “ that is to agree.
- iv. Negative assumption presented with negative expectation. Answer expected is ‘No’ in agreement with the assumption. (see Quirk et al 1972, Sinclair 1972)

Sinclair (Ibid) separates ‘copy tags’ from ‘checking tags’. The former are used as YES – NO questions but not so directly (see (iii) and (iv) above) while the latter are overtly so (see i & ii above). His further discussion and examples show that in either case, a tag question is not restricted to questioning. In English it could be a means of expressing speaker’s attitude such as surprise, skepticism, irony and so on.

### **The Problem with Tag Question Usage in Nigerian English**

Most users of English in Nigeria cope with the grammar of their L<sub>1</sub> along with the grammar of EL<sub>2</sub>. It is understandable then that aspects of the L<sub>1</sub> grammar impinge on EL<sub>2</sub> grammar and vice versa.

Reports from both majority L<sub>1</sub> (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) and minority L<sub>1</sub> (Kukelle and Ukwuani) show that although there are overlaps between the grammars of YES – NO questions in these Nigerian languages and English, yet significant differences also exist (see George R. (1953), Emennajo E. (1978), Bangbose A. (1967), Inaku M. (1995) and Roy-Omoni, A. (1996).

One thing that these Nigerian indigenous languages have in common is the fact that their YES – NO questions differ from their affirmative counterpart phonologically (rather than grammatically) through the use of tones (Mainly low tones). This difference has implications of structural complexity when the Nigerian speaker attempts to grapple with question transformations. Transformations such as subject – Aux inversion are non existent in their L<sub>1</sub>. For most of these speakers of English, the tag they are more familiar with is the invariable form of their L<sub>1</sub> which stands in opposition to the variable English tag.

Their L<sub>1</sub> tag is so elastic that it enables them (in addition to asking questions) to scold, implore, request, invite, warn, call for pity and so on. This fact about the illocutionary force of the usage affects both the structure and function of the tag. If we call forth our earlier example 1 & 2 above, the grammar is certainly unEnglish; and so are:

19. You dirtied your clothes, isn't it? (SBE ≠ Didn't you?)
20. I should go to blazes, isn't it? (SEB 3 Shouldn't I?)
21. They gave me just this one, isn't it (≠ SBE Didn't they?)
22. I borrowed two yesterday with the hope that I will get some more, isn't it? (≠SBE – Didn't I)
23. You will come with your wife, isn't it? (≠SBE will you/will you not?)
24. Ade, you will be part of this celebration, Is it not so? (≠SBE Will you /will you not?)
25. Alero took the books, isn't it? (SBE Didn't he?)

These usages may be internationally unintelligible and unacceptable. But the same cannot be said of their status intranationally – in Nigeria, they are intelligible and acceptable, though not acceptable as standard Nigerian English.

Their intelligibility arises from the Nigerian sociocultural context: where the L<sub>1</sub> thought-pattern enables the addressee to employ a cooperative principle to enhance communication. Some of such contexts are summarized below.

<u>Illocutionary Force</u> Example Number	<u>TAG</u> Isn't it/Is it not so?	<u>CONTEXT</u> Unexpressed, yet Underlying Questions/statements (Explicated)
Questioning Example 1 & 2,25 & 26	+ +	Is it not a fact that you took it? Is it not a fact that your parents did not permit you? Is it not a fact that Alero took

		the books? Is it not a fact that the teacher allowed her? - all being rhetorical in function.
Scolding/Warning 19 & 20	+ +	You dirtied your clothes and so you create more jobs for me. You know I hate it yet you are doing it. - <u>is</u> that not the truth? That <u>is</u> certainly what you <u>are</u> saying by your looks/actions. Be warned!! I will not tolerate your sauciness!.
Imploring: 21 22	+ +	Please agree that I was given just one and it is not enough. That having spent what I borrowed, I need to replace them. So, one is not enough
Inviting: 23 24	+ +	I am not in doubt that you'll come with your wife but let me invite you for it should <u>be</u> so Ade, I can see you looking for an excuse not to celebrate with us but it is only proper that you do, you <u>are</u> therefore reminded to come – make yourself available.

A scrutiny of these contexts shows how the **Be** in different forms (is/are/was/were/am/be) relate to the illocutionary force. This also accounts for the invariable nature of the tag: “Is it not so” where ‘isn’t’ is’ refers to what the speaker infers/is being said/thought of as the state of affairs motivating the question, warning, or invitation. Within these contexts therefore, these utterances are intelligible and acceptable to the Nigerian interlocutor/addressee. The degree of acceptability may vary depending on the occasion of use.Indeed

Tag questions are more common in colloquial than formal usages. A good grip of them is particularly useful in the Nigerian context where politeness to elders is required for effective informal communication\_tags can be indicators of politeness or irony.

It should be clear now that the grammar and semantics of the tag in English vis-à-vis the Nigerian languages do not facilitate the use of tag questions by Nigerian users of English. The inhibitions manifest in unintelligible usages such as the examples cited above. There is the need to correct this trend since English remains a world language with internationally (rather than locally) acceptable standards.

The methodical steps listed below should enhance the use of intelligible and acceptable Tags:

- (i) Always recall that the tag is variable in English and therefore different from L<sub>1</sub>
- (ii) The structure of tag questions is rule – governed; not arbitrary.
- (iii) Study the structure of the Tag in English:  
OPEATOR = {NEG}+ SUBJECT + {NEG}  
(See quirk et al, 1972).
- (iv) Proceed gradually to ensure that the structure of your usage (conforms to world standard English) is acceptable by conforming thus:

Step – a) identify the auxiliary of the preceding statement and where they are more than one, identify the first as the operator. Example 27a & 27b illustrate how this can be identified.

27a Mike was unhappy about it, + Tag.

27b Mike should (1<sup>st</sup>) not have (2<sup>nd</sup>) been (3<sup>rd</sup>) told, + Tag.

‘Was’ in 27a is the auxiliary and serves as ‘operator’, but in 27b where there are three auxiliaries the first which in this case is the modal ‘should’ is the operator.

Step –b) Use the same operator used in the preceding statement.

Examples 28a and b below show how the operators in the preceding statements 27a and b are used in the Tag:

- 28a Mike was unhappy about it, wasn't he?  
 28b Mike should not have been told, should he?  
 Step – c) If there is no auxiliary, use DO in its appropriate form  
 29a He sings for us, doesn't he?  
 29b We enjoyed those melodies of his, didn't we?  
 29c His sponsors appreciate our role, do they not/don't they?

- Step d) Let the subject of the tag repeat the pronominal subject of the preceding statement:  
 30a She realized it was late, didn't she/did she?  
 30b They appealed to her, didn't they?

- Step – e) Where the subject is a noun, use the appropriate pronoun substitute as exemplified below:

- 31a You parents, do not agree often with your teenagers, do you?  
 31b James and John are apparently twin names, aren't they?  
 31c Grandpa and I can never belong to the same generation, can we?  
 31d The vice chancellor is a parent, is she/he not?

- Step – f) Ensure that the subject – auxiliary inversion is observed to conform with the acceptable structure:

- 32a Sub + aux inverted → aux + sub  
 He/She has/does inverted → Does/has he/she?  
 32b They/We will/are inverted → will/are they/we?

- Step – g) Note the polarity of the preceding declarative that is; identifying whether it is

positive or negative. The negative is usually marked by the use of not or n't but the positive is not so marked. You may check this up in all examples given above 1-32.

- Step – h) Reverse the polarity for the tags, thus:  
Positive preceding statement + Positive tag.  
See examples 28b and 31b plus 33a & b below:
- 33a I have finished, haven't I/have I not?  
33b I have not finished, have I?

A corollary will produce negative equivalent of all the positives used above and vice versa.

- Step – i) Note the four types of English tag stated above and check which suits your illocutionary act – choose the same.

- Step – j) The nuclear tone of the tag occurs on the auxiliary, and is either rising or falling, not low tone as in L<sub>1</sub>

### **Conclusion**

English, like all natural languages is governed by rules that are natural to it. Since every bilingual automatically is a locus of contact, it is important that a conscious effort is made to keep the grammars of the two or more languages apart. The degree to which the bilingual sets the grammars apart is indicative of the degree/nature of his/her bilingualism. The foregoing discussion reveals that the problem of Tag question usage in Nigerian English is traceable to grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic factors.

Our suggested guide/steps out of this problem being methodical, is one of the easy (yet reliable) ways out of a gamble for acceptability. By applying these steps greater international intelligibility will also be ensured.

## Keys to abbreviations/Symbols Used

Aux – Auxiliary

S. – Subject

EL<sub>2</sub> – English as a second language      SBE – Standard  
British English

L<sub>1</sub> – First language    ≠    - Not the same as

NE – Nigerian English      →      - Is realized as

Neg – Negative word

Part – Particle      +    - Plus

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