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# Tag Questions in British and American English

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This large-scale corpus study charts differences between British English and American English as regards the use of “canonical” tag questions such as *It's raining, isn't it?*, *It's not raining, is it?*, or *It's raining, is it?* Several thousand instances of question tags were extracted from the British National Corpus and the Longman Spoken American Corpus, yielding nine times as many tag questions in colloquial British English as in colloquial American English (but also important register differences in British English). Polarity types and operators in tags also differ in the two varieties. Preliminary results concerning pragmatic functions point to a higher use of “facilitating” tags involving interlocutors in conversation in American English. Speaker age is important in both varieties, with older speakers using more canonical tag questions than younger speakers.

**Keywords:** *tag questions; differences between British and American English; discourse; spoken interaction; negation; polarity; age grading; language change; corpus linguistics; retrieval methods*

English people end almost every sentence with a question.

*Julian Ralph,  
Harper's Monthly Magazine, 1901*

Tag questions are frequent in many languages, but the “canonical” type of tag question with reversed or constant polarity, as in (1) through (4), is typical of English:<sup>1</sup>

	Anchor	Question Tag	Polarity
(1)	Makes you really think,	doesn't it. (LSAC) <sup>2</sup>	Positive–Negative (+/–)
(2)	Oh it's not very valuable	is it? (BNC-S)	Negative–Positive (–/+)
(3)	So this is the letter he sent you	is it? (LSAC)	Positive–Positive (+/+)
(4)	Yes, they don't come cheap	don't they? (BNC-S)	Negative–Negative (–/–)

This type of tag question consists of two clauses, an *anchor* and a *tag*.<sup>3</sup> The subject in the anchor can be a full noun phrase, a pronoun, or *there*, but in the tag, it must be either a personal pronoun, *there*, or *one*. The verb in the anchor can be a lexical

verb, an auxiliary, or a modal verb; the verb in the tag must be an auxiliary or a modal. We use the term *tag question* for the combination of anchor and tag. There can be reversed polarity (positive–negative or negative–positive) in the anchor clause and the following *question tag*, as in (1) and (2); constant positive polarity, as in (3); or constant negative polarity, as in (4), a rare type whose existence has occasionally been questioned (see e.g., Quirk et al. 1985, 813) but of which we have found some genuine examples.

Tag questions are a very conspicuous phenomenon of spoken language, and they have been frequently discussed in the literature.<sup>4</sup> Most attention has been given to their polarity properties and pragmatics, but there have been few quantitative studies, and little has been said about their different uses in British and American English. The great exception is Nässlin (1984), who carried out a quantitative empirical study based on spoken British English from the *Corpus of English Conversation* (Svartvik and Quirk 1980) and the Brown and Lancaster/Oslo-Bergen (LOB) Corpora, but she has little to say about differences between British and American grammar, as spoken American English corpus material was not available at the time. She does report some differences between the two varieties, showing more British than American examples in the fiction parts of the LOB and Brown corpora, but she pays little attention to them and plays down their importance. Algeo (1988, 1990, 2006) is the first modern scholar to discuss differences between the use of tag questions in British and American English, focusing especially on their pragmatics and more or less polite functions, but he does not quantify his findings. Biber et al. (1999, 211) discuss the frequency of tag questions in spoken and written registers, but they do not mention dialectal differences. An early American observer, the American journalist, and author Julian Ralph, made the observation quoted in the epigraph above in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* in 1901 (cf. Algeo 1990, 448), and Algeo (2006, 163) writes that “[a]lthough comparative statistics on the use of tag questions in the two national varieties are not available, their frequency in British seems greater than in American . . .”

Our purpose in the present article is to report on a quantitative study of the use of canonical tag questions in British and American English and to provide the comparative statistics previously lacking as well as an analysis of the data. We first present our data and account for the retrieval of potential tag questions from our corpora. This is followed by a description of the overall use of tag questions and their formal properties (polarity as well as verbs and pronouns in tags). We then turn our attention to semantics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistic factors. In the final section, we

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**Authors' Note:** We dedicate this article to Günter Rohdenburg in recognition of the inspiration he has provided in going beyond description to explanation in linguistics. We are deeply indebted to Andrea Roesle for allowing us to use the database of Roesle (2001), compiled in collaboration with Sebastian Hoffmann, and for many good ideas. We are also grateful to Karin Axelsson, Johan Elsness, Ditte Kimps, Anna-Brita Stenström, and two anonymous reviewers for stimulating comments on an earlier version of this article.

provide a summary of our findings and discuss possible explanations for the discrepancies between British and American English.

## Sources and Data Extraction

For our work, we used the spoken component of the British National Corpus (BNC-S, a total of 10.36 million words) and the Longman Spoken American Corpus (LSAC, 5 million words). Although tag questions are relatively easy to define from a formal point of view, their forms coincide with other constructions—e.g., *It is good, isn't it?/ Isn't it good?* Retrieving all of the tag questions (and only the tag questions) from these relatively large spoken corpora is therefore not a trivial task. This is particularly so because not all question tags occur in utterance-final position and a restriction to only those instances—which would be much easier to retrieve—would have seriously reduced the validity of our findings. An example of a non-utterance final tag is given in (5):

- (5) And right on the almost on the final whistle just before United scored in injury time, I think mid-fielder Martin Cool got in a very good volley *didn't he* from some distance, but it really was whistling toward goal? (BNC-S)

A purely lexical search (based on all the possible auxiliary constructions in tags) for all possible question tag variants retrieves about 120,000 instances in BNC-S and 55,000 in LSAC. We therefore applied a set of constraints to discard clearly irrelevant instances. We exemplify three of them here. One constraint was to disallow instances with a *wh*-word (or a *wh*-word followed by a noun) immediately preceding the potential tag as in (6) and (7):

- (6) Hello, *how* are you? (BNC-S)  
 (7) *What number* is it? (BNC-S)

Another constraint excluded sentences with a verb immediately following the pronoun, as in (8) and (9):

- (8) Doesn't he *like* the vet? (BNC-S)  
 (9) Hasn't he *improved*? (BNC-S)

A third constraint excluded examples containing an adjective immediately following the pronoun of the potential question tag, as in (10) and (11):

- (10) Are they *comfortable*? (BNC-S)  
 (11) Are you *happy* to do it . . . ? (BNC-S)

The application of such constraints is risky, however, because although it will increase the precision of the automated retrieval algorithm, it may have a negative

impact on recall by discarding items that ought to have been included. We therefore tested our constraints on a random subset of 1,000 potential tag questions retrieved by a purely lexical search. Since recall was only marginally affected in this set, we felt justified in applying the constraints to the full set of hits. This reduced the number of hits to just over 7,000 in LSAC. These sentences were then subjected to a manual search, yielding a total of 2,311 relevant instances. For BNC-S, the number of remaining hits was still too high for manual analysis even after applying our constraints: 35,500. We therefore worked with a random subset of these, which yielded a total of 4,973 relevant instances. Frequency figures for BNC-S are therefore based on extrapolation rather than full manual counts. However, given the high number of relevant instances, we are confident that our results are valid.

For our British data, an additional complication emerged: the question tags *innit?* and *weren't it?*, neither of which are found in the American data. As seen in (12), *innit?* can be used as an invariant form, something that has attracted considerable attention from recent scholars (see e.g., Stenström 1997; Stenström et al. 2002; Krug 1998). More frequently, however, *innit?* is found in utterances where it refers back to the verb *is* in the anchor clause, as shown in (13). Sentences such as (13) were included in our counts—there are 319 in our random subset—but 27 instances with invariant *innit* as in (12) were excluded:

- (12) That must be kids *innit?* (BNC-S)  
 (13) *It's boring life really, innit really?* (BNC-S)

*Weren't it?* has been discussed mostly by scholars treating *was/were* leveling or neutralization in British dialects, most recently by Tagliamonte (1998) and Pietsch (2005). They describe a characteristic pattern that also occurs in our corpora in recordings from all over Britain (viz. the use of *was* in affirmative sentences and *were* in negative and negative-interrogative sentences). This pattern is common in tag questions, as in (14) and (15). Notice that *weren't it?* functions as an invariant tag in (15):

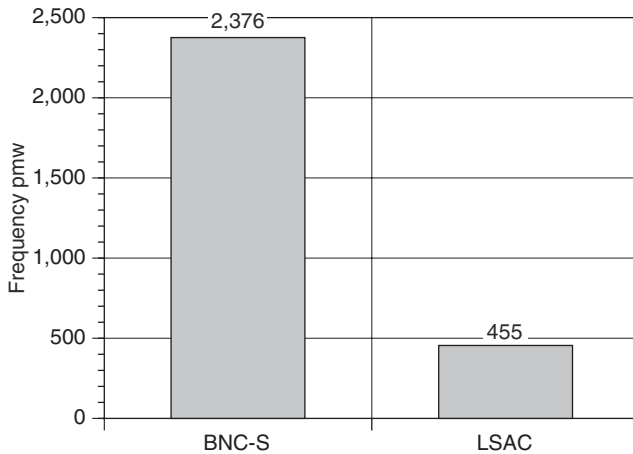
- (14) Oh it *was* Bob *weren't it?* (BNC-S)  
 (15) Yeah, it *says* every fourth Friday though *weren't it?* (BNC-S)

*Ain't* plus pronoun occurred in tags in both varieties, referring back to forms of *BE* or *HAVE*, as in (16) and (17):

- (16) Hey, that's Bill Cosby *ain't it?* (LSAC)  
 (17) And you've got a pair of black shoes *ain't you?* (BNC-S)<sup>5</sup>

Our investigation is thus based on almost 5,000 instances for British English and about 2,300 instances for American English. Overall results will be presented as

**Figure 1**  
**The Frequency of Tag Questions in British and American English, Calculated Per Million Words**



Note: BNC-S = the spoken component of the British National Corpus; LSAC = the Longman Spoken American Corpus.

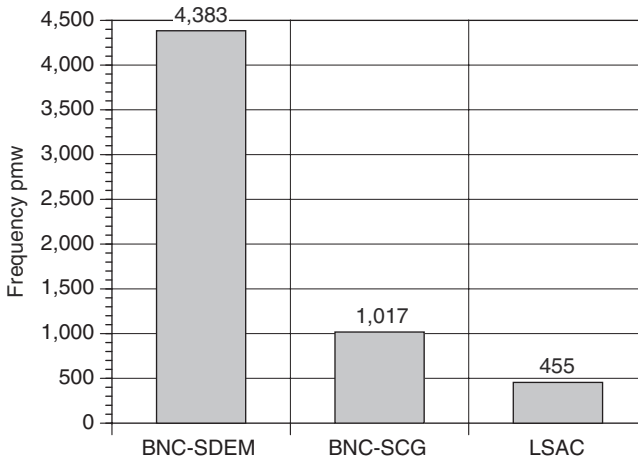
frequencies per million words. We also use subsets of our corpora for some more detailed analyses. This will be indicated in each case, and in these cases we present results in terms of proportions expressed as percentages in either variety.

## Results

We first present a general comparison between British and American English in Figure 1, which shows the frequency of occurrence of tag questions calculated per million words, henceforth pmw.

As appears from Figure 1, the frequency of tag questions in the British material is more than five times as high as in the American corpus (2,376 pmw vs. 455 pmw). However, the spoken component of the BNC consists of two rather different parts, one “context-governed” (6.14 million words), which contains more formal language use, and one “demographic” (4.21 million words), which consists of mostly informal spontaneous conversation. (For details, see Aston and Burnard 1998.) Although the collection and sampling methods for the British and American corpora were not identical, we think that a comparison of LSAC with the spoken demographic part of

**Figure 2**  
**Overall Frequency of Tag Questions in British and American English**



Note: BNC-SDEM = the spoken demographic subpart of the British National Corpus; LSAC = the Longman Spoken American Corpus.

the BNC offers a more reliable basis than using the whole BNC-S. Therefore, most of the British data presented below stem from the spoken demographic subpart of BNC (BNC-SDEM) rather than the entire spoken BNC-S. The overall distribution of tag questions in the three data sets can be seen in Figure 2.

If we compare the data for spontaneous conversation only, we thus see an even greater difference between the two varieties: tag questions are more than nine times as frequent in British English as in American English: 4,383 pmw compared with 455 pmw.

## Formal Properties of Tag Questions

### Polarity Types

We will now consider differences between preferred forms of tag questions in British and American English, beginning with the different types of polarity shown in the archetypal examples in (1) through (4) above. We also included tag questions with elliptical anchors with deletion of *BE*, as shown in (18) through (23) below. They were counted as equivalents of regular tag questions.

## Positive–Negative:

- (18) *Terrible* isn't she? (BNC-SDEM)
- (19) *Gorgeous blue* aren't they? (BNC-SDEM)
- (20) *East Detroit*, isn't it ? (LSAC)
- (21) *Piece of cake* isn't it? (LSAC)

## Negative–Positive:

- (22) *Not too cool*, is it Aaron? (LSAC)

## Positive–Positive:

- (23) *A ruddy doll's house* is it? (BNCS-DEM)

Tag questions with imperative and interrogative anchors were also included and similarly classified, as in (24) and (25):

- (24) *Just check* he's got enough fags up there will you? (BNC-SDEM)
- (25) *Someone ill* is there? (BNCS-DEM)

Biber et al. (1999, 211) note that “tags are most often added to a positive statement,” but they do not underpin their statement with precise numbers and make no reference to dialectal differences. Based on two samples of 1,000 instances each, we found that positive–negative polarity tag constructions are indeed the most frequent choice in both varieties, accounting for 75 percent of the totals in British and 69 percent in American English.

However, there are significant differences between the two varieties as regards the use of negative–positive and positive–positive constructions. Thus, as also appears from Figure 3, Americans use a greater proportion of negative–positive constructions (27 percent vs. 17 percent), as in (26) and (27):

- (26) You *aren't* drinking my apple juice *are you*? (LSAC)
- (27) It *doesn't* get any better, *does it*? (LSAC)

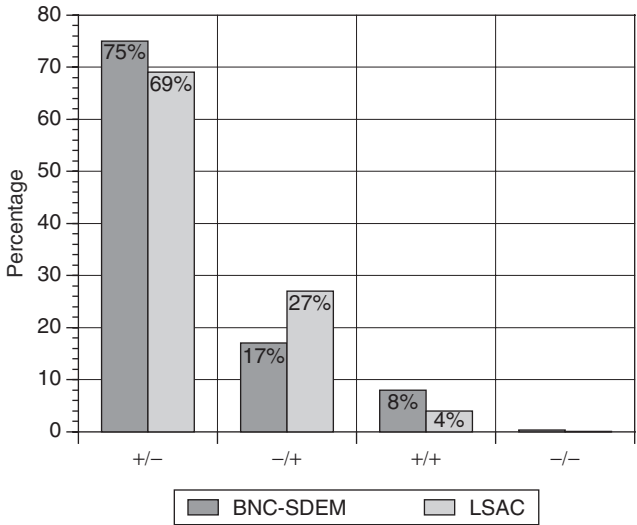
British speakers have a higher proportion of positive–positive constructions than Americans do (8 percent vs. 4 percent). Some examples of positive–positive polarity are given in (28) and (29):

- (28) The blue and the pink *are* general timetable *are they*? (BNC-SDEM)
- (29) *It's* an accumulative thing *is it*? (LSAC)

Finally, we found a few examples of the rare negative–negative type, three in BNC-SDEM and one in LSAC, shown in (30) through (32) and (35). An additional two



**Figure 3**  
**Proportional Distribution of Polarity in Two Subsets of 1,000 Words Each from BNC-SDEM and LSAC**



Note: BNC-SDEM = the spoken demographic subpart of the British National Corpus; LSAC = the Longman Spoken American Corpus.

were found in the context-governed part of BNC-S (BNC-SCG), and we include those here as well. They are listed as (33) and (34).

- (30) They *don't half get you* at it, *don't they?* (BNC-SDEM)
- (31) No it's bad for you *won't be half busy* to come out the Sunday before Christmas, *won't it?* (BNC-SDEM)
- (32) I bet you *didn't buy* a paper today either, *did you not?* (BNC-SDEM)
- (33) Yes, they *don't come cheap, don't they?* (BNC-SCG)
- (34) . . . your political affiliation was either one way or the other, and er er er you didn't er you *didn't m mince words* about it, *did you not, I mean you.* (BNC-SCG)
- (35) I'm not, I don't, *it's not* the uh Chinese red, *isn't it?* (LSAC)

The tags in (34) and (35) might be regarded as “performance errors” as they are appended to anchors that are replete with hesitation markers (filled pauses and repetition), but the British examples (30) through (33) cannot be thus dismissed. However, it is interesting to note that the anchors of (30) and (31) both contain the particularly British expression *not half* that functions as an intensifier meaning “really, very,” and

**Table 1**  
**Auxiliary Frequency in Question Tags in BNC-SDEM and LSAC**

Corpus	<i>BE</i>	<i>DO</i>	<i>WILL</i>	<i>HAVE</i>	<i>CAN</i>	Other Modals	Total
BNC-SDEM	1,840 49%	928 25%	334 9%	312 8%	185 5%	125 3%	3,724
LSAC	1,067 46%	941 41%	140 6%	71 3%	52 2%	40 2%	2,311

Note: BNC-SDEM = the spoken demographic subpart of the British National Corpus; LSAC = the Longman Spoken American Corpus.

that the meaning of the anchors is thus not negative at all but rather “really get you” in (30) and “really busy” in (31). We are thus left with only two bona fide examples of the negative–negative polarity type—slim pickings indeed.

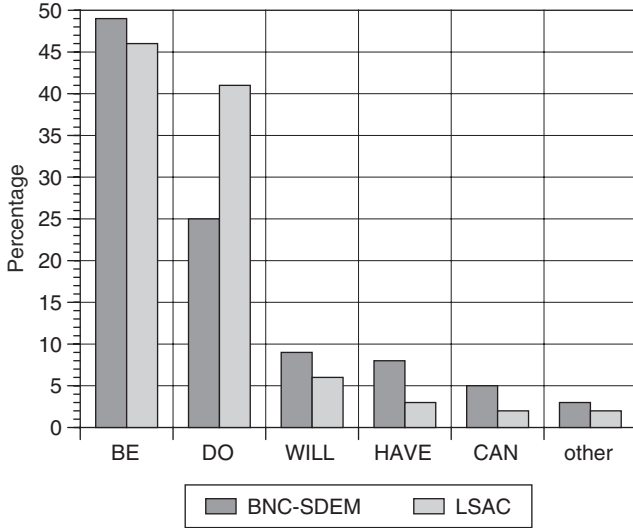
### Auxiliaries and Modal Verbs in Tags

We also examined the various auxiliaries and modals occurring as operators in question tags. The results are displayed in Table 1 and further illustrated in Figure 4. The verb *BE* is the most frequently occurring operator in both varieties, accounting for nearly 50 percent of all instances in BNC-SDEM and 46 percent in American English. Question tags with *DO* come second in both varieties, but there is a considerable difference between the varieties here, with 41 percent *DO* tags in American English and only 25 percent in British English. With the other major operators in question tags, *WILL*, *HAVE*, and *CAN*, British English scored higher than American English. Again, we can thus see considerable differences between the two varieties.

It is difficult even to speculate about the differences in distribution as regards *CAN* and *WILL*, but we hypothesized that the differences in occurrence between *HAVE* and *DO* would be related to two factors. First, the well-known preference of British English for the present perfect and of American English for the preterite (cf. Elsness 1997, 79) would lead to a higher frequency of *HAVE* tags in British English and for *DO* tags in American English. Second, the British preference for *HAVE GOT* to express possession where American English prefers simple *HAVE* (cf. Biber et al. 1991, 463) would also result in *HAVE* in tags in British English and *DO* tags in American English.<sup>6</sup> In what follows, these two factors are examined in some detail.

To check our first hypothesis, we needed to establish the proportions of present perfect and preterite constructions used for past time reference in our material.<sup>7</sup> To do this, we first established the total number of tag questions where either the present perfect or the preterite was used with past time reference. We thus looked at all present perfect forms of the type shown in (36) and (37) and preterites as exemplified here by (38) through (40):

**Figure 4**  
**Proportions of Auxiliary Use in Question Tags in BNC-SDEM and LSAC**



Note: BNC-SDEM = the spoken demographic subpart of the British National Corpus; LSAC = the Longman Spoken American Corpus.

- (36) Well, the price *has* probably *gone* up, *has* it? (BNC-SDEM)
- (37) You've *seen* California, *haven't* you? (LSAC)
- (38) But he *paid* dearly for it in the first place, *didn't* he? (BNC-SDEM)
- (39) You *didn't* get *moved* today, *did* you? (LSAC)
- (40) Your son *had* better things to do, *had* he? (BNC-SDEM)<sup>8</sup>

This yielded a total of 673 British tag questions with past time reference (based on our random subset), expressed by 288 present perfect forms and 385 preterites, and an American sample of 394 tag questions with past time reference, expressed by 64 present perfects and 330 preterite forms—see Table 2.

Table 2 supports our hypothesis that the predilection for present perfect in British English and for preterite forms in American English could help explain the different frequencies of *HAVE* and *DO* among the tags in our samples, with 43 percent present perfect forms in BNC-SDEM and only 16 percent in LSAC, and concomitantly, 57 percent preterite *did* in BNC-SDEM and 84 percent in LSAC.

Our second hypothesis required a close examination of the verbs of anchor clauses in British and American English, especially with regard to the use of *HAVE*

**Table 2**  
**Past Time Reference by means of Present Perfect and Preterite**  
**Forms in the Spoken Demographic Part of the BNC and in LSAC**

	Present Perfect Anchors with <i>have/has</i> Tags		Preterite Anchors with <i>did</i> Tags		Totals Past Time Reference
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>
BNC-SDEM	288	43	384	57	672
LSAC	64	16	329	84	393

Note: BNC-SDEM = the spoken demographic subpart of the British National Corpus; LSAC = the Longman Spoken American Corpus.

**Table 3**  
**Anchor Types in Tag Questions with *have, has* in the Tag**

Anchor Type	BNC-SDEM		LSAC	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Have/has got	89 <sup>a</sup>	30	5 <sup>b</sup>	7
Have/has got to	31 <sup>c</sup>	11	0	
Have to	0		1	1.4
Possessive have, has	5	2	3	4.4
All other present perfect forms	168	57	58	87
	293	100	67	100

Note: BNC-SDEM = the spoken demographic subpart of the British National Corpus; LSAC = the Longman Spoken American Corpus.

a. Includes 12 with ellipsis of *HAVE*.

b. Includes 4 with ellipsis of *HAVE*.

c. Includes 5 with ellipsis of *HAVE*.

*GOT*. Table 3 shows that a large proportion (41 percent) of the present perfect forms in British English anchor clauses are indeed various combinations with *GOT*, with the meaning of either possession or obligation (i.e., they are present perfects only as regards form, not meaning).<sup>9</sup>

The number of anchors with *GOT* forms followed by *HAVE* tags is very low in LSAC, only 5/67. We find at least a partial explanation for this if we examine the tags containing present tense forms of *DO*, as shown in Table 4. Because of the large number of examples in our corpus, we restricted our investigation here to two random samples of 200 examples from each sample.

**Table 4**  
**Anchor Types in Tag Questions with *do/does* in the Tag**  
**in Two Subsamples of 200 Instances Each**

Anchor Type	BNC-SDEM		LSAC	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Regular lexical verb	193	97	151	76
<i>Have/has got</i>	0		6	3
<i>Have got to</i>	0		1	0.5
<i>Gotta (have ellipted)</i>	1	0.5	1	0.5
<i>Have to (affirmative)</i>	1	0.5	8	4
<i>Have to (negative)</i>	2	1	0	
Possessive <i>have, has</i> (affirmative)	2	1	10	5
Possessive <i>don't/doesn't have</i> (negative)	1	0.5	23	12
	200		200	

Note: BNC-SDEM = the spoken demographic subpart of the British National Corpus; LSAC = the Longman Spoken American Corpus.

Notice that *have/has got* in the anchor clause is followed by *do/does* in the tag in American English, as in (41) and (42). This does not happen in British English:

- (41) You *got* lots of money in your budget, *don't you?* (LSAC)  
 (42) Hey, we've *got* glue, *don't we?* (LSAC)

However, the most important observation to be made about Table 4 is that present tense *DO*-tags reflect regular lexical verbs in 97 percent of all cases in British English, but only in 76 percent of all cases in American English, where a number of different forms of *DO*, *HAVE*, and *HAVE GOT* precede the tag. The most common of these is *HAVE*, most frequently occurring in negated forms, and as is well known, *DO* is normally used as “code” (Quirk et al. 1985, 125) for *HAVE* in American English, as in (43) and (44):

- (43) Well, you *have*, like, family down in LA, *don't you?* (LSAC)  
 (44) You *don't have* the back up on Marion [sic] registration, *do you?* (LSAC)

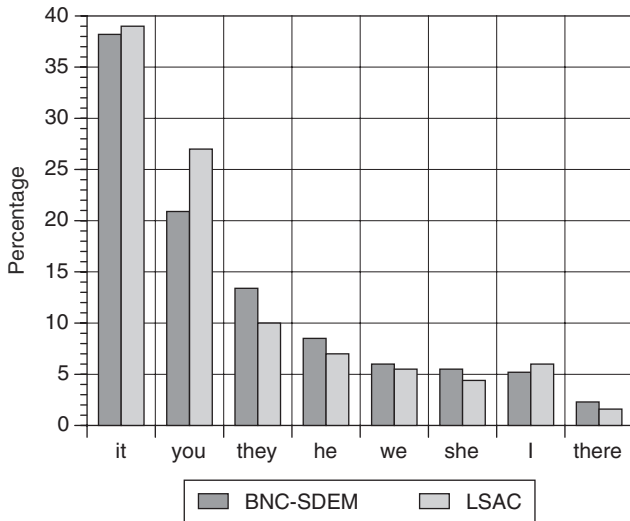
American English can still also use *HAVE*-tags after anchors with *HAVE*, as in (45) below, but this does not happen after negative anchors; (44) above is typical.

- (45) . . . I *have* fourteen of them, *haven't I.* (LSAC)

As demonstrated by Nelson (2004), British English normally also has *DO*-tags as code for *HAVE* in anchor clauses, as in (46), but *HAVE* anchors are rare; as we saw above, *GOT* constructions dominate.<sup>10</sup>

- (46) . . . ooh, oh you *have* this, *don't you?* (BNC-SDEM)

**Figure 5**  
**Proportions of Pronouns in Question Tags in BNC-SDEM and LSAC**



Note: BNC-SDEM = the spoken demographic subpart of the British National Corpus; LSAC = the Longman Spoken American Corpus.

In sum, we think that our results bear out our hypotheses and that we have shown that the higher frequency of *HAVE*-tags in British English conversation and the higher frequency of *DO*-tags in American English conversation are due to a complex interaction of the following factors:

- The general predilection for the present perfect to represent past time in British English, with concomitant *HAVE*-tags;
- The preference for the preterite in American English, with concomitant *DO*-tags;
- The British use of *HAVE GOT* forms to express possession, with concomitant *HAVE*-tags;
- The American preference for simple *HAVE*, with concomitant *DO*-tags;
- The American use of *DO*-tags after *HAVE GOT* forms.

### Pronouns and Verb Pronoun Combinations in Tags

There are also differences between British English and American English as regards pronominal use in question tags, as appears from Figure 5. *You* accounts for a much higher proportion of examples in American English than in British English, and *it* and *I* for somewhat higher proportions, but notice that here and elsewhere, the

**Table 5<sup>11</sup>**  
**The Fifteen Most Frequent Question Tags in BNC-SDEM and LSAC**

Tag	BNC-SDEM			LSAC		
	N = 3,724	%	Rank	N = 2,311	%	Rank
<i>isn't it?</i>	760 <sup>a</sup>	20.4	1	429	18.6	1
<i>is it?</i>	227	6.1	2	115	5	4
<i>aren't they?</i>	133	3.6	3	65	2.8	9
<i>don't you?</i>	99	2.7	4	124	5.4	2
<i>do you?</i>	89	2.4	5	123	5.3	3
<i>don't they?</i>	88	2.4	6	55	2.4	11
<i>aren't you?</i>	82	2.2	7	56	2.4	10
<i>wasn't it?</i>	76	2	8	76	3.3	6
<i>haven't you?</i>	69	1.9	9	21	0.9	25
<i>are you?</i>	63	1.7	10	52	2.3	12
<i>weren't it</i>	62	1.7	11	—	—	—
<i>didn't you?</i>	61	1.6	12	70	3	7
<i>isn't he?</i>	57	1.5	13	43	1.9	13
<i>didn't he?</i>	52	1.4	14	24	1	21
<i>doesn't it?</i>	52	1.4	15	101	4.4	5

Note: BNC-SDEM = the spoken demographic subpart of the British National Corpus; LSAC = the Longman Spoken American Corpus.

a. This figure includes 319 instances of *innit* that are not clearly invariant.

actual numbers of occurrence are always higher in British English because of the higher frequency of question tags in that variety.

Looking next at the entire tags consisting of auxiliary, pronoun, and optional *n't*, we found a total of 200 different combinations, most of them occurring in very low proportions. This refutes Krug's (1998) suggestion that the English complex system of tag questions "is being transformed into a simpler one with a lexicalised invariant *innit*" (145); also recall that we found only 27 instances of invariant *innit* in our sample. In the British material, 188 out of the 200 combinations are attested, and in the American material, 143; this discrepancy is probably largely due to the different sizes of the samples. Notice that 12 out of the 200 types are attested only in the American material. The distribution of the most frequent types in the two varieties is shown in Table 5. *Isn't it?* is the top-ranking tag in both varieties, with over 20.4 percent of all occurrences in BNC-SDEM and 18.6 percent in LSAC. *Is it?* ranks second in BNC-SDEM with 6.1 percent and reaches 5 percent in LSAC. Notice that three *DO*-tags rank higher in LSAC but not in BNC-DEM; thus *don't you?* and *do you?* rank high in LSAC with over 5 percent each, and *doesn't it?* reaches over 4 percent. All remaining tags each account for 4 percent or much less in both corpora. Note the different rankings in the two varieties.

*There* is the only word other than a personal pronoun to appear as the subject of a tag in our material.<sup>12</sup> It is the least frequent of all, accounting for only 2.3 percent in BNC-SDEM (84 instances) and 1.6 percent in LSAC (37 instances). Not only is its frequency somewhat lower in American English, but interestingly as well, *there* only combines with forms of *BE* in that variety, as in (47). In British English, there is a wider variety of verbs, as in (48) through (50):

- (47) There are a couple of girls in there, *aren't there?* (LSAC 168102)
- (48) . . . should be three, *shouldn't there?* (BNC-SDEM)
- (49) There doesn't happen to be a pen in there, *does there?* (BNC-SDEM)
- (50) . . . there would be no question of not being able to afford it, *would there?* (BNC-SDEM)

### **The Semantics and Pragmatics of Tag Questions in British and American English**

If we want to understand the differences in the distribution of tag questions in British and American English, it is necessary to consider why they are used at all and to take their meaning and function in discourse into account. At a very abstract level, this has been done in many of the earlier works dealing with tag questions, but discussions are usually based on constructed examples with imaginary contexts (cf. e.g., Aijmer 1979; Cattell 1973; Millar and Brown 1979. McGregor 1995 uses empirical material, but it consists mostly of "unusual types" and predominantly deals with syntax). Our focus in this section is on the functions of the tags themselves.

Two scholars have attempted to classify the functions of tags based on substantial empirical work: Holmes (1983, 1984, 1986, 1995) and Algeo (1988, 1990, 2006); their systems have evolved over the years. There is partial overlap of their categories, but there are also considerable differences, in part because of their different goals and methodologies. Holmes's work is based on recorded conversations of New Zealand English, at most 60,000 words, yielding less than a hundred examples, and her research focus is on politeness and gender. Algeo's main research interest is the comparison of the use of canonical tags in British and American English, and his data collection is eclectic. Much of his original material comes from the *Survey of English Usage* (later included in the London-Lund Corpus; cf. also Svartvik and Quirk 1980), and some derives from casual observation of private conversations and television shows. Holmes provides statistics of her material, but the sample is quite small and entirely middle class; Algeo does not quantify.

Holmes regards tags as hedges on the preceding proposition (the anchor in our terminology). She postulates two major categories of tags: *epistemic modal* and *affective*, with three affective subtypes: *facilitative*, *softening*, and *challenging*. Epistemic modal tags have rising intonation, but affective tags usually have falling



intonation, even if there is “no exact correlation between function and form” (Holmes 1995, 79). We give examples from Holmes (1995) below, with our numbering. Intonation is indicated before the tag.

*Epistemic modal* tags “express genuine speaker uncertainty rather than politeness” (Holmes 1995, 80):

- (51) Fay Weldon’s lecture is at eight /isn’t it

*Facilitative tags* “. . . are examples of hedges which serve as positive politeness devices. They invite the addressee to contribute to the discourse” (Holmes 1995, 81):

- (52) Host to a guest at her dinner party: You’ve got a new job Tom \haven’t you?

*Softening tags* are “negative politeness devices, used to attenuate the force of negatively affective utterances, such as directives . . . and criticisms . . .” (Holmes 1995, 81):

- (53) Make a cup of tea /would you?  
 (54) Older brother to younger brother who has just stepped on the cat’s bowl and spilled her milk all over the floor: That was a really dumb thing to do \wasn’t it?

*Challenging tags* are “confrontational strategies [which] may pressure a reluctant addressee to reply or aggressively boost the force of a negative speech act.” (Holmes 1995, 80, using an example from Thomas 1989, 152):

- (55) Superintendent criticizing a detective constable’s performance:  
 A: Now you er fully understand that, \don’t you?  
 B: Yes, Sir, indeed, yeah.

Algeo (1990) divides tags into *informational*, *confirmatory*, *punctuational*, *peremptory*, and *aggressive* (the last term is changed to *antagonistic* in Algeo 2006).<sup>13</sup> He explains and exemplifies them as follows; again, the numbers are ours:

*Informational*: “The speaker has an idea about something (the statement preceding the tag), but asks for information without presuming to know what the answerer will say. The tune of the tag is a rising intonation” (Algeo 1990, 445).

- (56) Q: You don’t have to wear any sort of glasses or anything, *do you*?  
 A: Well, I wear glasses for reading sometimes. (S1/9.1246–47, Survey of English Usage, University College London)

*Confirmatory*: “A more frequent use of tag questions is not to seek information but to draw the person addressed into the conversation . . . . These tags ask for confirmation of what the speaker has said[.] . . . The intonation of these tags may be a rising tune, but is more likely to be a falling one . . . .” (Algeo 1990, 445-46).

(57) Q: But you don't have Swindon on your little map, *do you?*

A: No, I don't have Swindon on my map. (S1/11.1262-64, Survey of English Usage, University College London)

*Punctuational*: "Some tags are used . . . merely to point up what the speaker has said [and] are the vocal equivalent of an exclamation point or of underlining for emphasis" (Algeo 1990, 446). Algeo does not mention intonation here.

(58) You classicists, you've probably not done Old English, *have you?* Course you haven't. (S.1/6.929-31, Survey of English Usage, University College London)

*Peremptory*: "A peremptory tag immediately follows a statement of obvious or universal truth, with which it is practically impossible to disagree . . . the speaker considers the conversation about it at an end . . . . The intonational tune is always a falling one. The tag is . . . often a put-down of the addressee" (Algeo 1990, 447-48).

(59) I wasn't born yesterday, *was I?* (*Brookside*, Channel 4)

*Aggressive*: "The aggressive tag is superficially similar to the peremptory one but with a crucial difference . . . [it] follows a statement that is by no means obvious and that the addressee cannot be reasonably expected to know . . . . By implying that addressees ought to know what they actually cannot know, [it] is insulting and provocative" (Algeo 1990, 447).

(60) A: Is that your brother? [question addressed to a young man talking on the telephone]

Q: It's my dad, *innit?* (*EastEnders*, BBC1)

Algeo's classification comes fairly close to Holmes's at the two ends. Thus Algeo's informational tags seem to be the equivalents of Holmes's epistemic modal ones, and at the other end of the scale, peremptory and aggressive tags are definitely affective. Algeo's confirmatory tags are not a clear-cut category. They appear to straddle the epistemic, information-seeking, and affective functions, in that they are used to "draw the person addressed into the conversation," which is also the chief characteristic of Holmes's "facilitative" tags. The term *punctuational* is difficult to interpret in terms of pragmatic function, but as an indicator of speaker attitude, this type of tag seems similar to stance adverbials.

The multifunctionality of tags is a problem for any classification, as pointed out by Holmes (1983), Cameron et al. (1989), and Coates (1996).<sup>14</sup> Coates (1996) gives the following nice example of distinctions carried by intonation:

(61) [Topic: Friend's mother fainting in the street]

Karen: I think if you're with someone who suddenly falls over! if nothing else you'd get into a restaurant or somewhere where you could sit down! wouldn't you? /wouldn't you? . well I think I would!

As Coates (1996) explains,

[t]he two tag questions use the same words, but express very different meanings. The first is a typical confirming-the-shared-world tag which expects no reply; it has falling intonation. The second is an information-seeking tag with rising intonation, which does seek a response. . . . (196)

Intonation is not always a clue, however, but Holmes (1983) maintains that it is possible to “identify the predominant or primary function of any particular tag question in a specific social context” (45). As the corpora we used have no indications of intonation, we had to rely exclusively on linguistic context, and our results must therefore be regarded as very preliminary.

Table 6 provides an overview of the classifications used by Holmes and Algeo and the system we have adopted for the present work. Entering Algeo’s confirmatory category twice is intentional, as it belongs to both the epistemic modal and affective categories. We reserve that label for tags that we could identify as information-seeking. We have adopted the label *facilitating* for tags whose major function appears to be to make the addressee participate in interaction, although not always out of politeness—see (65) below. Missing in Holmes’s system is the function of stressing the speaker’s point of view for which Algeo uses the label *punctuational*; however, we use the term *attitudinal* as it is a clear indicator of the stance-marking function of this type. We include Algeo’s distinction between *peremptory* and *aggressive* tags because we want to examine his claim that aggressive tags are typical of British English. There are no unequivocal examples of Holmes’s *softening* category in the subpart of the material that we classified for pragmatic function and that label is therefore lacking in our system.

To chart the actual use of pragmatic types of tags in British and American English, we classified 500 instances each from BNC-S and LSAC into different pragmatic types. In the present study, we concentrate on the 371 tags found in the spoken demographic subcorpus. Examples from our corpora are given in (62) through (67):

(62) *Informational* (genuine request for information):

Stuart: You’re getting paid for this, *are you?*  
Mark: Twenty five quid. (BNC-SDEM)

(63) *Confirmatory* (the speaker is not sure of what s/he says, wants confirmation):

A: I’m gonna try to go walking for a little bit. I don’t need a jacket, *do I?*  
B: No, it’s still pleasant. (LSAC)

(64) *Attitudinal* (emphasizes what the speaker says, does not expect involvement or reply):

Larna: yeah she’ll be in trouble, *won’t she*, she often gets her own drinks anyway, she sort of like, she’s at that age she can, it’s only when they get out there together.  
Pauline: mh. (BNC-SDEM)

**Table 6**  
**Classifications of Pragmatic Functions of Tags**

Macro Category	Holmes	Algeo	The Present Work
Epistemic modal	Modal	Informational Confirmatory	Informational Confirmatory
Affective	Facilitative Softening	Confirmatory	Facilitating
	Challenging	Punctuational Peremptory Aggressive, antagonistic	Attitudinal Peremptory Aggressive

(65) *Facilitating* (the speaker is sure of the truth of what s/he says but wants to involve listener):

Teacher: Right, it's two *isn't it?*

Pupil: Mm. (BNC-SDEM)

(66) *Peremptory* ("follows statement of generally acknowledged . . . truth," "is intended to . . . close off debate" [Algeo 1988, 182-183])<sup>15</sup>

Kathleen: How old's your mum and dad?

Unknown: (laughs)

Kathleen: He don't know neither.

Unknown: They're in their forties anyway, I think.

Enid: That's what I said.

Kathleen: Well, we come to that conclusion, *didn't we?*

Unknown: Me dad's think me dad's forty seven. Me mum's about forty three, forty four. (BNC-SDEM)

(67) *Aggressive* (functions as insult or provocation)

Ernest: . . . well I put, I thought you were staying to tea so I put six eggs on.

Arthur: oh aye, yeah, alright.

Peggy: you put what?

Ernest: put six eggs on, *didn't I?* anyhow, I'm putting, I'm putting two on. (BNC-SDEM)

Three types, *confirmatory*, *facilitating*, and *attitudinal* tags, together account for over 90 percent of the totals in both BNC-SDEM and LSAC. The informational type accounts for only 3 percent.<sup>16</sup> The distribution of the different types is shown in Table 7 and Figure 6. Notice that the aggressive tag does in fact only occur in British English, but it accounts for a very low proportion of examples there. However, as tag questions are nine times as frequent in British conversation, this type is still salient enough to catch the attention of American speakers.

We see that the greatest difference between the two varieties is that there is a much larger proportion of facilitating tags in American English than in British

**Table 7**  
**The Distribution of Pragmatic Types of Tags in BNC-SDEM and LSAC**

Tag Type	BNC-SDEM		LSAC	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Confirmatory	136	37	151	30
Facilitating	133	36	248	50
Attitudinal	65	18	58	12
Informational	16	4	18	4
Aggressive	4	1	0	0
Peremptory	3	1	5	1
Other	14	4	20	< 4
Totals	371	100	500	100

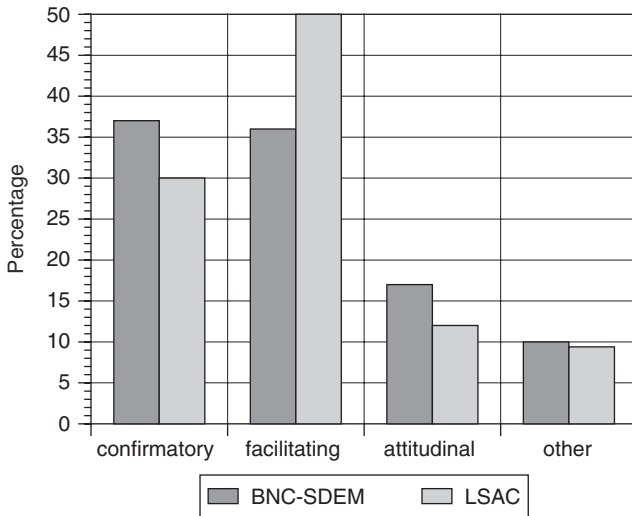
Note: BNC-SDEM = the spoken demographic subpart of the British National Corpus; LSAC = the Longman Spoken American Corpus.

English: the difference is 14 percentage points. On the other hand, the proportions of confirmatory and attitudinal tags turn out to be higher in British English.

The meaning and pragmatics of tag questions has often been related to their different polarities—cf. e.g., Quirk et al. (1985, 811ff); and especially McGregor, (1995), who provides a fine-grained analysis but based on very limited data. Both Quirk et al. and McGregor pay special attention to constant-polarity tags, which Quirk et al. (1985, 812) characterize as potentially scolding, sarcastic, or “sarcastically contradictory” (see also Huddleston 1970; Hudson 1975). However, McGregor (1995) finds no support for this in his data. Kimps (2005), in a detailed empirical study of constant polarity tags based on material from the COBUILD (the Collins Birmingham University International Language Database), COLT (the Corpus of London Teenager English), and LLC (the London–Lund Corpus) corpora (LLC is annotated for intonation), presents a detailed survey of meanings of constant-polarity tags and has also shown that only 18 percent of her 425 COBUILD examples in fact convey “irony, sarcasm, mockery or contempt.” Most of her examples express “mirativity” (i.e., surprise, disbelief, or disapproval, or were used for verification; Ditte Kimps, personal communication, January 4, 2006).<sup>17</sup>

So far, we have been unable to correlate polarity types with pragmatic categories. We have also been unable to find a correlation between the use of specific pronouns and pragmatic categories of tag questions; for instance, a hypothesis that the higher frequency of the pronoun *you* in American English might be related to the higher American use of facilitating tags was not substantiated. Further research using material that is annotated for intonation is likely to provide more conclusive answers about the interplay between the form and the function of tag questions.

**Figure 6**  
**Proportions of Types of Pragmatic Meanings of Question**  
**Tags in BNC-SDEM and LSAC**



Note: BNC-SDEM = the spoken demographic subpart of the British National Corpus; LSAC = the Longman Spoken American Corpus.

## Sociolinguistic Factors in the Use of Tag Questions

We have already shown that there is a strong correlation between the register and the use of tag questions: informal conversations have a much higher frequency of tag questions than speech in formal settings. Sociolinguistic factors such as socioeconomic class, gender, and age also need to be considered as conditioning factors. Thus, social class has been associated with at least some types of tags by Algeo (1990, 448). In the present context, we will focus exclusively on gender and age.

### Gender

Gender has been considered to be an important factor for the use of tag questions ever since Lakoff (1975) claimed, purely on the basis of intuition, that women use more tag questions than men, and that this is a sign of insecurity. This claim has been refuted by many researchers since then (e.g., Dubois and Crouch, 1975; O'Barr and Atkins, 1980), who maintain that tag questions are used by powerless persons of

**Table 8**  
**The Use of Tag Questions By Men and Women in BNC-SDEM and LSAC**

	BNC-SDEM		LSAC	
	<i>N</i>	pmw	<i>N</i>	pmw
Male	6,081	4,209	680	453
Female	10,454	4,647	1,067	489

Note: BNC-SDEM = the spoken demographic subpart of the British National Corpus; LSAC = the Longman Spoken American Corpus.

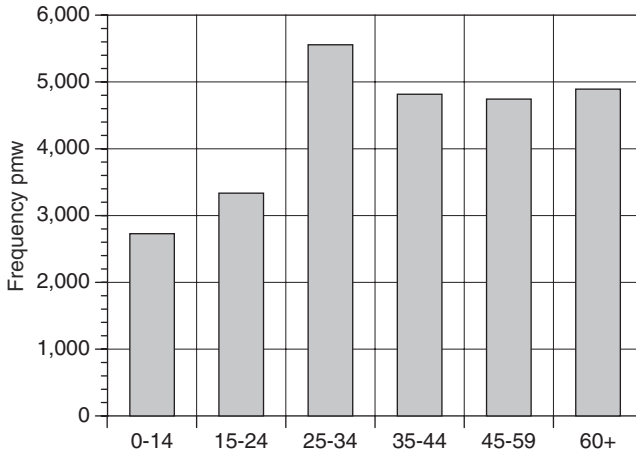
either sex. On the other hand, Cameron et al. (1989, 88) argue that tag questions can “function as an interactional resource of the powerful rather than the powerless in conversation,” and Cameron (1992) also develops this point. As shown in Table 8, our data reveal some differences in the frequency of tag questions used by women and men on either side of the Atlantic, with women using slightly higher numbers of tag questions. However, this may mask important differences between individual texts and between male and female speakers in different interactional roles. Our method of data extraction makes our material in its present shape unsuitable for an in-depth study of the gender variable, as it often does not provide sufficient information about the speech situation or personal relationships between participants, which are crucial for the gendered use of tag questions, and we therefore refrain from further analysis of this variable here.

### Tag Questions and Speaker Age

In contrast, our material proves ideally suited for a study of the use of tag questions by different age groups in both the British and American data. Although absolute numbers are widely different, we found similar tendencies in both data sets, as appears in Figures 7 and 8: younger people use far fewer canonical tag questions than older people, with a cutoff somewhere in the twenty-year bracket. Thus, British speakers aged fourteen years and under use fewer than 3,000 tag questions pmw, while speakers in the age groups over twenty-five years use around 5,000 tag questions pmw. American speakers aged fourteen years or less use about 250 tag questions pmw, and speakers over sixty years use more than three times as many: over 800 pmw. Between the two extremes, the two samples differ; British speakers tend to use the highest number of tag questions between twenty-five and thirty-four years, and Americans between forty-five and fifty-nine years show a drop in tag question use. We have as yet no explanation for these findings.

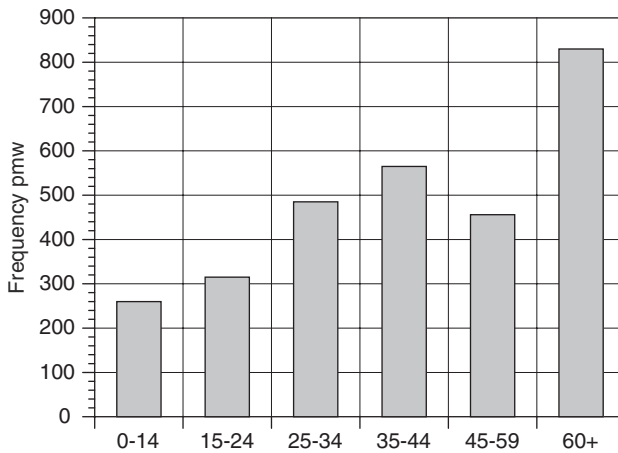
However, it is unlikely that these results reflect a tendency in younger speakers to use fewer tags overall. At least for British English there are interesting data for comparison in Stenström et al.’s (2002) study of British teenage talk. They studied the use

**Figure 7**  
**The Use of Tag Questions by Different Age Groups in BNC-SDEM**



Note: BNC-SDEM = the spoken demographic subpart of the British National Corpus.

**Figure 8**  
**The Use of Tag Questions in Different Age Groups in LSAC**



Note: LSAC = the Longman Spoken American Corpus.



of invariant tags only (*yeah, eh, okay, right, innit*) in the London area and found that these tags (especially *yeah, right, innit*) are extensively used by teenagers, peaking in late adolescence and young adulthood and then going down sharply among adults over thirty years of age. Stenström et al. did not study canonical tags, and we did not include invariant tags in our study, but the results are complementary. It seems highly probable that what we see here is not a development toward fewer tags in younger people but a shift in the type of tags used by different age groups, a hypothesis that is at least partially supported by a preliminary study of British English by Serino (2006). Whether this reflects linguistic change rather than mere age-grading is impossible to say at this stage; further research involving real-time studies of all types of tags is necessary. As far as we know, there is no study of American teenagers' use of tags corresponding to Stenström et al. (2002), and we are therefore unable to hypothesize about the existence of a similar development in American English. One factor that might be of interest in researching both British and American English is the function of the increased use of a high rising tone (HRT) for statements in the language of younger speakers in both language varieties (cf. McLemore 1991). It seems likely that this intonation pattern is used to create involvement, in ways similar to tag questions, as has been suggested by Britain (1992) and Holmes (1995, 101) for New Zealand English. Before this can be established, we need to know more about the pragmatic functions of tag questions, however.

## Summary and Discussion

We have shown that the use of "canonical" tag questions differs in spoken colloquial British and American English in some spectacular ways:

- First of all, there are nine times as many tag questions in British English as in similar types of American English (but the frequency of tags is lower in less colloquial British English).
- The preferences as regards polarity types differ in the two varieties, the greatest difference being that negative-positive tag questions are more frequent in American English than in British English.
- The choice of auxiliaries or modal verbs in tags also differs, with American English preferring *DO*-tags and British English *HAVE*-tags; this can be explained by the differences in the use of tenses in the two varieties and the predilection for *HAVE GOT* constructions in anchors in British English.
- Both dialects show a great variety of verb-pronoun combinations, 200 different types in all. The claim that invariant *innit* is taking over thus seems premature.
- Our results concerning the pragmatic functions of tag questions must be regarded as preliminary, but there appear to be substantial differences between the two varieties here as well. Facilitating tag questions account for a greater proportion in American English, and confirmatory and attitudinal uses account for a greater proportion in the British data. Aggressive tag questions are used only by British speakers, but in a very

low proportion—only 1 percent of all cases. It is probable that their saliency explains the attention that this numerically small category has received in the literature. We have not been able to correlate polarity types and pragmatic functions, but it is clear from Kimps's (2005) research that positive–positive tag questions are not predominantly used in aggressive functions, as has previously been claimed.

- Speaker age is an important conditioning factor in both varieties, with older speakers using more canonical tag questions and younger speakers significantly fewer. Data from Stenström et al. (2002) strongly suggest that younger speakers of British English prefer invariant tags like *yeah, eh, okay, right, and innit*, and we therefore hypothesize that the total use of tag questions and other hedging devices may still be fairly similar across age groups.

Although we have been able to explain some of the differences between the use of tag questions in British and American English (notably those concerning the distribution of auxiliaries in tags), other questions remain, such as why Americans use a higher proportion of negative–positive tag questions than British speakers, and why there is a higher proportion of *you* subjects but a lower proportion of *there* subjects in American English tags than in British English tags. The key question concerns our most spectacular finding (viz. the difference in overall frequency of canonical tag questions in the two varieties). Why do British speakers use nine times as many canonical tag questions as Americans do?

We believe that two paths must be pursued in the search for an answer to this question. One has to do with the pragmatic functions of tag questions: Do tag questions have functions in British English that are not as current in American English? Or do Americans use other means for the same functions? Do Americans use more invariant tags such as *right, okay, hunh?*<sup>18</sup> What is the role of intonation? We intend to take a two-pronged approach to this problem, examining both formal and pragmatic properties of tag questions, considering both canonical and invariant tags.

The other line of research that we believe to be necessary concerns the history of tag questions. If tag questions are a late development in British English, emerging or increasing in use at about the same time as the waves of emigration from Britain to North America, that could explain their lower frequency in American English. There could of course also be parallel but independent developments. Wikberg (1975), Salmon (1987a, 1987b), and Ukaji (1998) have demonstrated that canonical tag questions did indeed exist in Early Modern English, but little seems to be known about their earlier or subsequent development. It is unlikely that any evidence will be available for Old or Middle English, but we are currently examining a large corpus of British and American drama texts to chart the development of tag questions from circa 1500 to the present day (see also Hoffmann, 2006). Drama as data has obvious limitations, but it should help us elucidate the differences between British and American uses of tag questions and lead to a greater understanding of their usage and pragmatics in the two main varieties of English.

## Notes

1. The term *canonical* is from Holmes (1983). Finnish has tag questions of a type similar to the English canonical ones, as in (i) to (ii):

- (i) Sataa, eikö sadakin? (formal)
  - (ii) Sataa, eiks sadakin? (colloquial)
- ‘it is raining not raining, right?’

Many thanks to Merja Kytö and Jyrki Kalliokoski for the Finnish examples.

2. BNC-S = the spoken component of the British National Corpus; LSAC = the Longman Spoken American Corpus. For further particulars, see the following section.

3. The term *anchor* comes from Huddleston and Pullum (2002, 891). Terminology is rife in the field and many others have been used, e.g., *host clause* (Cattell 1973), *main clause* (Biber et al. 1999), *basic clause* (Östman 1981), *matrix clause* (Quirk et al. 1985), *stem clause* (McGregor 1995), *reference clause* (Nässlin 1984). Tags are usually called tags, however.

4. See, for example, Aijmer (1979), Allerton (in press), Bublitz (1979), Cameron (1992), Cameron et al. (1989), Cattell (1973), Cheshire (1991), Coates (1996), Holmes (1983, 1984, 1986, 1995), Huddleston (1970), Hudson (1975), McGregor (1995), Östman (1981), Stenström (1997, 2005), and Stenström et al. (2002).

5. Invariant *weren't it* and *ain't* tags were included in our counts but accounted for very low proportions, 1.6 percent and 1.9 percent, respectively.

6. We did not expect British *HAVE* in anchors to be echoed by *HAVE* in tags. As conclusively shown by Nelson (2004), constructions of the type *He has a dog, hasn't he?* now account for less than 5 percent of possible cases in British English.

7. We retain Elsness' (1997) terminology here; Biber et al. (1999) use *perfect aspect* and *past tense*. Neither Elsness nor Biber et al. provides general information on the distribution of the two tenses to express past time reference in conversation.

8. This type, with *HAVE* “possess” in the anchor, is extremely rare, with only one instance in either variety. Most *had*-tags reflect either *had better*, or past perfect forms in the anchors and were not included.

9. Biber et al. do not discuss the possible importance of *HAVE GOT* for their statistics. Elsness does not include *HAVE GOT* forms with present time reference among perfects.

10. There are only five instances of *HAVE* “possess” in BNC-SDEM and three in the LSAC sample.

11. Three types of tag questions do not appear among the top fifteen in BNC-SDEM but were among the most frequent in LSAC. Notice that *did you?* shares rank nine with *aren't they?*

### Tags with Higher Ranking in American English Than in British English

Tag	BNC-SDEM Rank	LSAC Rank	<i>N</i>	%
<i>did you?</i>	22	9	65	2.8
<i>wouldn't it?</i>	32	14	42	1.8
<i>does it?</i>	25	15	38	1.6

Note: BNC-SDEM = the spoken demographic subpart of the British National Corpus; LSAC = the Longman Spoken American Corpus.

12. The written component of the BNC contains one instance of the indefinite pronoun *one* as subject of the tag, as shown in (iii):

- (iii) One's always in the dock and being questioned, *isn't one?*

13. Our research was carried out before we had access to Algeo (2006).

14. Cameron et al. (1989, 84) question any a priori assumption of correspondence between form and function, stressing the essential multifunctionality of all utterances in discourse, but they do go on to use Holmes's system to classify tags in a study based on 45,000 words.

15. This category is especially difficult to pinpoint and can border on the aggressive but is normally polite.

16. This tallies fairly well with Coates (1996, 306, fn 2), who reports that in her material, "roughly 16 per cent of tag questions can be described as information-seeking, while the remaining 84 per cent have other functions." However, the proportions in our data are very different from those reported by Holmes (1995), who has close to 50 percent "epistemic modal" tag questions. There could be real regional differences here, or differences of use based on social class.

17. Constant polarity tags were especially frequent in the eighteenth century, and many of those seem to have been aggressive. This could explain the statements of grammarians (see Hoffmann, 2006, 43-45).

18. Compare Norrick 1995 on *hunh*; *eh* is Canadian, and *innit* is not used in North America.

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