"She knows more about Hong Kong than you do isn't it":
Tag questions in Hong Kong conversational English

Abstract:
This paper concerns a corpus-based intercultural communication study comparing
the choice and use of tag questions by Hong Kong Chinese and native speakers of
English. It outlines the main findings and seeks to explain where, when, and why
tag questions were used differently by the two groups of speakers in their
conversations. The study has shown that compared to their native interlocutors,
Hong Kong Chinese used tag questions much less frequently and used them to
express a much more limited repertoire of pragmatic meanings. A few tentative
explanations have been offered to account for the phenomena.

1. Introduction

   Recent cross-cultural and intercultural research has drawn insights and concepts
from theoretical frameworks such as speech act theory, conversation analysis,
sociolinguistics, ethnography of communication, intercultural communication and
cross-cultural pragmatics (Kachru, 1992: 235; Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris,
1997: 8). Many research studies have been conducted on the pragmatic
behaviour, i.e. speech acts, in the intercultural interaction context. They have
observed intercultural differences in various speech acts in terms of their
distribution, function and frequency of occurrence (see for example, Scollon and
Scollon, 1980; Schmidt and Richards, 1980; Blum-Kulka, 1982; Olshtain and
Cohen, 1983; and Beebe, *et al*, 1990; Blum-Kulka, *et al*, 1989; Creese, 1991;
Kumagai, 1993; Ardent, 1996; Liao, 1994; Liao and Bresnahan, 1996). Ardent
(1996), for instance, compared Chinese and American participants in their relative
frequency of complaint performance and avoidance and attributed the differences
to the differing sociopragmatic decision-making of the two groups of speakers
(Ardent, 1996: 125). Liao and Bresnahan (1996: 703) conducted a contrastive
pragmatic study on American English and Mandarin refusal strategies. The
findings showed that Taiwanese and Americans differ in their formulaic
expressions and strategies in refusal due to their differing perceptions of socio-
cultural values and modes of politeness.

   Studies into examining particular linguistic or communicative features, acts or
strategies manifested in intercultural discourse also try to gauge the influence of
the native language, similarity in the cultures of the native and target language,
and transfer of the native language socio-pragmatics on the non-native speaker's
communicative competence in the target language (Thomas, 1983; House, 1989:
96). More recent work into intercultural communication and interaction has
shown that for non-native speakers, proficiency in the target language requires

much more than accuracy in lexico-grammar and pronunciation. To be competent speakers in intercultural communication, they also need to possess sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and intercultural competence (Byram, 1997: 73). In communication and interaction with people from another country or culture, competent discoursers should be able to use the target language appropriately by considering the specific linguistic, social, physical and cultural factors. Based on the knowledge and skills, they will then be able to acquire new cultural understandings and new languages (Byram, 1997: 71).

The study reported in this paper describes the use of "a simple but major system of communication" (Baik and Shim, 1993: 43) in English - tag questions - in an intercultural communication context. It compares Hong Kong Chinese and native speakers of English in their respective usage of English tag questions in social interaction and discusses the similarities and differences manifested in the findings. Tag questions are used frequently among native speakers of English and serve a variety of pragmatic functions in communication. A comparable construction exists in Cantonese but it differs from the English tag questions in terms of the complexity in syntactic structure and function.

2. Tag questions in English

2.1. Syntactic structure

The English tag questions have been examined and described in terms of their syntactic structure (see for example, Quirk et al., 1985: 810-814) and functions (see for example, Holmes, 1983, 1984a, 1984b). Collins COBUILD English Grammar (1990: 433) defines a tag question as comprising a statement and a tag; a tag is a short structure that is added to the end of a statement to turn it into a question. Tags are made up of an auxiliary or a form of *be* and *do* and a personal pronoun which refers to the subject of the statement. Tags are always contracted. The English tag question, according to Sinclair (1972), takes two basic syntactic forms. The first type, "checking tag", consists of a declarative and an interrogative which differ in polarity; the second type, "copy tag", is made up of a declarative and an interrogative which have the same polarity (Sinclair, 1972: 75-79). Elsewhere in the literature, Alexander (1994: 256-258), for example, offers a very similar description of tag questions. He identifies three types of tags, and they are affirmative-negative/negative-affirmative tag questions, affirmative-affirmative tag questions, and negative-negative tag questions.

There are other types of tags which fall outside the scope of this study and they include "invariant tags" (Quirk et al., 1985: 814; Algeo, 1988: 174) such as *isn't that so?*, *don't you think?* and *am I right?*, and "article tags" or "word tags" (Weber, 1993: 71) such as *huh?*, *right?* and *OK?* added to the end of declarative questions.

2.2. Functions

An adequate description of tag questions must consider not only their syntax but also their functions. Lakoff (1975: 17-19), for instance, views the use of tag questions as a manifestation of politeness which then reflects the relationship between the interlocutors. Hudson (1975: 24-29) suggests that tags, different

from interrogatives, always imply an expectation of agreement and disagreement. Levinson (1983: 447) sees tags as a discourse strategy for regulating turns in conversations.

The literature has extensive discussions on gender differences in the use of tag questions and tag questions as markers of authority and power in discourse (Cameron, 1992: 16). For example, Lakoff (1975: 53-54) argues that the use of tags was characteristic of the female discourse employed for expressing uncertainty and softening the impact of assertions. Holmes (1983) provides a comprehensive analysis of the frequency and usage of different kinds of tags from an analysis of recordings of conversations, interviews, and classrooms. Some functions of tags, according to Holmes (1983), include the speaker's expression of uncertainty about facts and the speaker's attitudes and feelings towards the interlocutor. Holmes (1984b: 50) suggests that the pragmatic usage of tag questions differs between men and women, and that men use more modal tags and women use more affective tags. Hudson (1975) and Harris (1984) argues that tag questions are a means to exert power and coerce agreement in asymmetrical discourses.

John Algeo (1988: 190-187) identifies five functions for English tag questions - the informational tag, the confirmatory tag, the punctuational tag, the peremptory tag, and the aggressive tag - and discussed their respective pragmatic meanings. His view is supported by Leech (1983) who considers the meaning of tag questions to be strongly pragmatic.

Winefield, Chandler and Bassett (1989) examine the use of tag questions in a specialized discourse situation. They perform quantitative and qualitative analysis of an entire programme of psychotherapeutic interaction between a male psychiatrist and a female patient. Their study reveals that the frequency of the patient's tag questions increases greatly as the consultation evolves and her tags are mainly used to appeal to solidarity and to check the therapist's response to her views. The change in the patient's use of tags indicates her increasing independence and self-confidence and decreasing powerlessness (Winefield, Chandler and Bassett, 1989: 84-85). In an intercultural linguistic context, Baik and Shim (1993) examine some Korean-English bilinguals and find a positive direct relationship between EFL proficiency and performance in answering negative tag questions in English. Their study has also found that due to the difference in Korean and English language systems, the bilingual participants are less competent when giving positive agreement (*Yes, I did*) to a tag question (*You didn't go to the library, did you?*) than when giving negative agreement (*No, (I didn't)*) (Baik and Shim, 1993: 44).

3. Tag questions in Cantonese
In Hong Kong, the native language for more than 95% of the people is Cantonese which is second to Mandarin as an important and influential dialect of Chinese. In Cantonese, there is also a mechanism for turning statements into questions, but in Cantonese the form is invariant translating *aren't you?*, *isn't she?*, *don't they?* in English (Matthews and Yip, 1994: 317-318). The usual tag is

haih-mhaih?, the word-for-word translation of which is *yes-not yes*. In other words, Cantonese tag questions normally have an affirmative-negative structure. Similar to the English tags, the Cantonese tags are often contracted, resulting in the loss of the second *h* sound. An example of Cantonese tag is given in Matthews and Yip (1994: 317) as below:

Leih	*jouh*	*yisang*	*ge,*	*haih-mhaih*	*a?*
you	work	doctor	(particle)	right[1]	(particle)

'You're a doctor, aren't you?'

In Cantonese, a speaker uses the tag questions to either check with the hearer for agreement or confirm from the hearer whether or not an opinion or a belief about something is true. This kind of question tends to presume an affirmative answer (Matthews and Yip, 1994: 317).

4. The present study

The corpus-based study reported in this paper represents an intercultural communication study on the use of English tag questions by Hong Kong Chinese and native speakers of English in conversations. More specifically, the study was designed to address the following research questions:

(a) How are Hong Kong Chinese and native speakers of English compared in their use of tag questions in the relative frequency of syntactic structures

(Alexander, 1988) and pragmatic functions (Algeo, 1988) of the tag questions?

(b) How can similarities and differences in their respective usage of English tag questions be accounted for?

The data for this study was obtained from the Hong Kong Corpus of Spoken English (HKCSE) currently being compiled by researchers in the Department of English at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The Hong Kong Corpus of Conversational English (HKCCE), a sub-corpus of the HKCSE, consists of real-life conversations between Hong Kong Chinese and native speakers of English who know each other as friends or acquaintances. The recordings were obtained with the assistance of the participants who either agreed to having a mini-disc recorder placed in front of them while having a social interaction or themselves recorded one of their intercultural conversations for the research team. The database for this paper totalled six hours with ten face-to-face English conversations. The duration of the conversations ranged from 5 to 71 minutes. The database analyzed consisted of both dyadic and multi-party conversations.

5. Findings
5.1 Frequency of tag questions
The ten English conversations analyzed were found to contain 52 examples of tag questions. Table 1 below shows the composition of the participants involved and the frequency of tag questions recorded in the ten conversations.

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[1] The author of this paper thinks that *haih-mhaih* should more accurately be translated to *yes-not yes*, instead of *right*

Table 1. Corpus of ten conversations: Participants and frequency of tag questions

Conversation Code	NS female	NS male	HKC female	HKC male	Tag Questions Total = 52
01	*		* (N=2)		3
02	*			*	1
03		*		*	7
04		*	*		10
05		*		*	1
06		*	*	*	2
07		*	*		5
08		*		*	2
09	*		*		4
10		*		*	17

NS = Native speakers of English
HKC = Hong Kong Chinese speakers of English

5.2 Syntactic form of tag questions. HKC

An examination of the HKCCE for the use of tag questions by Hong Kong Chinese has revealed no examples of negative-affirmative and negative-negative structures. There were only examples of affirmative-negative and affirmative-affirmative tag questions, an example of each is shown below:
(1) (06)
A: male   b: female   c: male   d: female
(the upper case indicates native speakers and the lower case Hong Kong Chinese)

399   d: the last one that came over to their home
400   c: yeah (.) I will be |the
401   b: |is he er C__'s boyfriend
402   c: that's what everyone says it looks like isn't it but
403   A: ((laughs))
404   b: no not yet
405   A: but apparently they kiss hug and touch each other all the time (.) in fact no they
406   are just in a close working relationship

Extract 2 (05)
A: male   c: male

265   c: yeah right ((Cantonese)) I think it's German is it
266   A: German (.) yeah right German converted to er ( )

5.3 Frequency of syntactic forms. HKC versus NS

The frequency of use of various syntactic forms of tag questions by Hong Kong Chinese and native speakers was compared. A clear difference existed between the two groups of participants, and that is, the frequency with which the two groups employed the two main categories of tag questions in the HKCCE (see

Table 2). Hong Kong Chinese in general were found to employ tag questions much less frequently than their native interlocutors (10 instances as opposed to 42).

Table 2. Frequency of tag questions of various syntactic forms: HKC versus NS

Syntactic form	HKC	NS
+ve - -ve	9	24
-ve - +ve	0	9
+ve - +ve	1	9
-ve - -ve	0	0
	10	42

Two phenomena have been noticed so far. First, generally speaking, regardless of the type of tag question and the gender of the speaker, Hong Kong Chinese used tag questions far less frequently than native speakers. Second, there were no examples of Hong Kong Chinese using the negative-affirmative and the negative-negative tag question combinations. The fact that Hong Kong Chinese speakers of English in this study did not use negative-affirmative tag questions can possibly be explained by L1 transfer since the syntactic structure of Cantonese tag questions is normally affirmative-negative (Matthews and Yip, 1994: 317). In the case of non-occurrence of the negative-negative combination, Alexander (1994) notes that in English language, the occurrence of negative-negative tag questions is very rare. As shown in this study, the same phenomenon was also observed in the Hong Kong Chinese conversing in English.

5.4. Rules of concord: HKC versus NS

One of the more obvious differences between the tag questions employed by Hong Kong Chinese and native speakers is at the grammatical level. Hong Kong Chinese did not always observe the rules of concord for Standard English, but whether or not such errors had affected the pragmatic functions of tag questions uttered by Hong Kong Chinese will be examined later. The invariant form of tag question in Cantonese may help explain why these speakers had found the concord rules for tag questions problematic. The failure to apply the rules of concord can be illustrated with some examples from the database. The male Hong Kong Chinese in one of the conversations, lasting one hour, has used tag questions six times but all in one form, and that is, *isn't it?*. This form happens to be "correct" on two occasions probably by chance rather than by design. Extracts (3) and (4) below show the two instances of "correct" use of tag questions by the male speaker in discussion.

(3) (03)
b: male

39   b: |no no the style is white the style is very different this sort of lettuce is the
40   b: very different from local lettuce local lettuce the er the foliage is different isn't it

(4) (03)
b: male

68   b: it is you told me you lived in your friend's house <u>isn't it</u>

The following examples illustrate an "incorrect" use of the tag *isn't it?* on the part of the same male Hong Kong Chinese. In extract (5), for instance, the tag question should have been *six years I see well probably that maid knows er more about Hong Kong than you <u>doesn't she</u> =*.
(5) (03)
b: male

112   b: =six years I see well probably that maid knows er more about Hong Kong than
113   you <u>isn't it</u>=

In extract (6) below, the "correct" form of the tag question should have been *she has some some bad feeling about you know having to serve er one more couple <u>doesn't she</u>.*
(6) (03)
b: male

120   b: mm what do you mean |oh I see well I think she maybe maybe she has some some
121   A: |well
122   b: bad feeling about you know having to serve er one more couple <u>isn't it</u>

Similarly, the *isn't it?* in extracts (7) and (8) should have been *wouldn't it?* and *mustn't it?* respectively.
(7) (03)
b: male

b: said er and ask her to stop um you know paying so much to her maid because it
    would er |you know disturb the er the the the market situation |(.) ((laughs))
    <u>isn't it</u>

(8) (03)
b: male

859   b: well your house in Australia must be er more or less of the same size <u>isn't it</u>

The fact that the male Hong Kong Chinese has consistently used the same form of tag, *isn't it?*, on all occasions may show a deficiency in his linguistic knowledge of the English grammar of question tags. In other words, he failed to first, consider the tense-bearing element of the verb phrase in the statement and then reverse its negativity; and second, select a pronoun appropriate to the subject of the statement. However, it could equally be argued that this might have been due to L1 transfer. It is possible that the "invariant question tag" *isn't it?* could be specific to the English spoken by Hong Kong Chinese in general, as a result of the influence by the native language (Algeo, 1988: 174). This phenomenon, nonetheless, needs to be substantiated by a larger corpus of data in the future.
5.5 Pragmatic functions of tag questions: HKC versus NS

The 52 instances of tag question in the conversational database were classified into five kinds of pragmatic meaning, as identified and discussed in Algeo (1988: 180-187 and 1990: 443-450). They are the informational tag, the confirmatory tag, the punctuational tag, the peremptory tag, and the aggressive tag.

The tag *does she?* in extract (9), spoken with a rising tone, is an "informational tag" (Algeo, 1988:180) which asks a real question for information. Speaker A is requesting information from the hearer, b.

(9) (03)

A: male   b: male

699 A: okay and do you have a choice
700 b: yes yes you |can
701 A: |because because N__ doesn't have a quarter <u>does she</u>
702 b: no because she opted to buy the house rather than live in er government quarters

The "confirmatory tag" is usually spoken with a falling pitch and functions to invite the hearer to agree with the speaker and to draw the hearer into the discourse by providing support to the speaker (Algeo, 1988: 181). In extract (10) below, the male Hong Kong Cantonese is trying to invite his interlocutor to agree with him. However, the tag question is spoken with a rising tone, instead of a falling one.

(10) (03)

A: male   b: male

110 b: mm so he he used he has been using that maid for eighteen years no =
111 A: = no no no about six =
112 b: =six years I see well probably that maid knows er more about Hong Kong than
113 b: you do <u>isn't it</u> =
114 A: = oh yea
115 b: |and was it was it the problem that you encounter (pause) you don't know how to
116 A: |I think
117 b: communicate with her ((laughs))

The "punctuational tag" is uttered to draw the attention of the hearer (Algeo, 1990: 446). The tag *is it?* in extract (11) is an example of punctuational tag.

(11) (10)

A: male   b: male

144 b: |yea yea so there is no short cut to publication now I mean if you go
145 b: for that kind of er international journal that are more famous
146 A: well yea well that's a reputable one as well because it's not just getting something
147 A: published <u>is it</u> it's got to be in something internationally refereed and so on yea
148 b: and I think the other thing is that they are I think they have a er a whole backlog
149 of paper
150 A: they have accepted but they don't have any space journal space to publish it

The fourth type of tag, "peremptory tag", is used to end the discussion of a topic (Algeo, 1988: 182). When it is spoken with a falling tone, the function is to "put

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off a questioner"; when spoken with a low-level tone, it is intended to be "abrasive". In extract (12), the male native speaker says the tag with a gentle falling pitch, indicating a wish to close the topic (speaker b's house in China) under discussion. After the tag question, there is a pause followed by a topic change initiated by speaker b.

(12) (10)
A: male   b: male

571   b: in the best kind of life we can we can imagine that you earn money here and then
572   b: you go over to China and live |and buy a really nice house |(.) and live comfortably
573   A: |yea |yea
574   b: for the rest of the life (pause) actually before the the the the June fourth event in
575   b: eighty nine a lot of people are actually saying that China will be the best place to
576   b: retire for Hong Kong
577   people =
578   A: =yea (.) well very attractive isn't it (.) very attractive (pause) |yea
579   b: |have you been to
580   China

When the "aggressive tag" is spoken with a falling or low level tone, it is supposed to be openly hostile and is used to accuse the hearer of "a lack of common sense, consideration, or good will" (Algeo, 1988: 185). In the intercultural conversational database, no example of aggressive tag has been found. This may be accounted for by the fact that the data was obtained non-surreptitiously. As Renouf (1986: 177) states, "totally natural and spontaneous conversation will only occur if the speakers are unaware that they are being recorded." Similarly, Burton (1980: 174) argues that the presence of the tape recorder may change the private nature of conversations. The participants of this study were likely to be conscious of what they were saying and how they were saying it in the presence of the mini-disc recorder and so less likely to display hostile verbal behaviour.

5 6   Frequency of pragmatic meanings HKC versus NS
Table 3 below summarizes the frequency of tag questions used by both NS and HKC grouped into the five pragmatic meanings (Algeo, 1988, 1990).

Table 3. Frequency of pragmatic functions: NS versus HKC

Pragmatic meaning	HKC	NS	TOTAL (N=52)
Informational		4	4
Confirmatory	11	26	37
Punctuational		10	10
Peremptory		1	1
Aggressive			0

One very interesting finding is that the range of pragmatic meanings expressed by Hong Kong Chinese is very limited compared to native speakers. The data reveals that while native speakers used tag questions for expressing all but one pragmatic meanings, Hong Kong Chinese tended to confine their pragmatic usage of question tags to only seeking confirmation of or support for what they are saying. The fact that the other pragmatic meanings are not expressed at all in the ten conversations examined presumably have implications in terms of the intercultural communicative competence of these non-native speakers. Questions that are likely to arise include whether such usage by Hong Kong Chinese had led to pragmatic failure and whether Hong Kong Chinese had seen tag questions as used for seeking confirmation only.

But the concern of this paper is why Hong Kong Chinese have not used tag questions to express a wider repertoire of pragmatic meanings. A probable answer is again the interference of their native language. Since Cantonese tag questions are mainly employed to check with the hearer for agreement or confirm from the hearer about the truth of an opinion or a belief about something, they tend to presume an affirmative answer (Matthews and Yip, 1994: 317). This may help to explain why the Hong Kong Chinese in this study have mainly employed the confirmatory tag.

6. Conclusions

The findings of this study are by no means conclusive. As Cameron *et al.* (1989: 85) points out, tag questions, like other linguistic forms, are characterized by complex multifunctionality and diversity of meaning, which makes it difficult to classify tag questions in terms of pragmatic functions. As regards the use of tag questions by the two genders, in the data examined so far, there is simply insufficient evidence to suggest that there are significant differences between men and women for Hong Kong Chinese and native speakers of English in terms of any kind of authority and power relationship manifested in their use of tag questions. Finally, the amount of data analyzed means that any conclusions drawn should not be automatically generalized.

However, a number of tentative conclusions may be drawn. First, this study has shown that Hong Kong Chinese use English tag questions much less frequently compared to native speakers of English. Second, the syntactic realization of English tag questions used by Hong Kong Chinese is more limited and is probably influenced by the tag question structure in their native language. Third, the range of pragmatic meanings expressed in the English tag questions by Hong Kong Chinese is very narrow compared to that of their native interlocutors. In fact, the pragmatic meaning is restricted to seeking confirmation from the interlocutor. This again can be attributed to the influence of the pragmatic meaning of the native language tag question being confined only to this function. Finally, reasons such as insufficient linguistic knowledge of English tag questions, or lacking the socio-pragmatic competence to apply appropriate linguistic rules for realising the tag questions, or even the interference of the recording machine have been offered

as possible explanations for the differences in the use of English tag questions by the two sets of speakers in this study.

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