

Gunnel Tottie, Sebastian Hoffmann, Andrea Roesle  
Universität Zürich  
sebhoff@es.unizh.ch

### Tag Questions in American and British English

Tag questions of the form in (1) – (2) are a characteristic feature of spoken English but rarely occur in the written language.

- (1) She likes coffee, doesn't she?
- (2) He doesn't work, does he?

However, their use varies between different varieties of the language. Algeo (1988, 1990) and Allerton (forthcoming) discuss differences between the use of tag questions in American and British English, providing interesting insights especially into the pragmatics of their use. Algeo also remarks on the respective frequency of tag questions in the two varieties. However, his examples are gathered from casual reading of written sources representing speech, not genuine spoken language, and his studies thus remain impressionistic in nature. Allerton's study is an important theoretical contribution but is not based on data.

In order to arrive at a true picture of the use of tag questions in American and British English, we used two corpora of spoken English, the British National Corpus (BNC, 10 million words of which consist of speech), and the Longman Spoken American Corpus (LSAC), comprising 5 million words. We used an algorithm for automatic retrieval that was based on a lexical search of all the question forms that were possible (auxiliary plus personal pronoun or *there*, with and without negation), with built-in constraints. From the tens of thousands of possible tag questions, we extracted random subsets, which were then manually examined, ending up with some 7,200 examples of genuine tag questions.

We found substantial differences between American and British English, not only in frequency, but in their form, polarity patterns, and pragmatics. Especially, their use as discourse markers seems not to have been previously discussed.

#### References

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