

Ditte Kimps. *Tag questions in conversation: A typology of their interactional and stance meanings.* Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 2018. 250 pp. ISBN: 9789027200433. Reviewed by **Tove Larsson**, Uppsala University/Université catholique de Louvain.

In this book, Ditte Kimps provides a comprehensive overview of English tag questions (e.g. *It is peculiar, isn't it?*) and outlines a corpus-based, semantic-pragmatic typology of their speech functions and stance-taking properties. In investigating how grammatical, prosodic and conversational properties of tag questions cluster, Kimps offers novel insights of particular interest not only to researchers in semantics and pragmatics, but also to conversation analysts and linguists in general. The book has eight chapters. The first three chapters provide an introduction (Chapter 1), an overview of the state of the art and the aims of the study (Chapter 2) and a description of the material and methods used (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 summarizes the specific properties of tag questions. Chapters 5 and 6 subsequently present a systematic description of the speech functions and stance types of tag questions. In Chapter 7, the results of a usage-based study are presented; a concluding discussion is provided in Chapter 8. In the present review, each chapter will be summarized first, after which an evaluation will follow.

Chapter 1 introduces the topic of tag questions (henceforth TQs) and provides an overview of the book. TQs are here defined as “utterances with an interrogative tag” (p. 1). The book focuses on English TQs with grammatically dependent clausal tags (e.g. *She suffered some mental distress, didn't she?*), thus excluding instances with a grammatically independent tag (e.g. *That's French, right?*). It is stated that a corpus-based typology of the speech functions and stance-marking properties of these kinds of TQs will be developed. In doing so, the book will investigate the grammatical form of English TQs, the conversational properties of TQs and “the contributions made by prosody to the interpersonal meanings of TQs” (p. 3), along with the interaction between these features. As TQs have been found to be most frequent in British English (e.g.

Tottie and Hoffmann 2006), the author limits the scope to British English data only.

The second chapter presents previous research on TQs and outlines the aims in more detail. The chapter begins with an overview of important previous work in the field, for example summarizing the foci and features of previous studies that are relevant to the present volume. The findings of these studies are subsequently synthesized thematically, and existing form-based, interactional and stance typologies are critically examined. Among other things, the author points to problems with overlapping categories and unclear definitions in previous work. While the book focuses on variable TQs (i.e. TQs with a grammatically dependent tag), there is also a brief section devoted to invariant TQs, such as *innit*, as these are reported to share some functions with variable TQs since these two categories of TQs can be difficult to tease apart in naturally occurring data. The stated aims are to (i) develop a corpus-based typology of interpersonal TQs within the framework of functional linguistics (e.g. Halliday, 1994) that incorporates intonation, (ii) explain the interaction between grammatical, conversational and prosodic properties of TQs and (iii) “rethink the dominant functional approach” of Holmes (e.g. 1983) and Algeo (e.g. 1988) (p. 31).

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the data and method used. Due to the fact that prosodic transcription (and/or access to the transcriptions) was needed to meet the aims of the study, the author decided on using three different corpora in order to attain a sufficiently large sample of TQs. The corpora included are the *London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English* (LLC), the *Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language* (COLT) and the British English component of the *International Corpus of English* (ICE-GB). A thorough description of the corpora and the steps taken to extract the data follows. It is explained how the TQs were extracted using regular expressions. While the already-existing prosodic transcription was kept for COLT and LLC, the author carried out the prosodic analysis of the ICE-GB data. Due to the make-up of the corpora, the bulk of the data investigated come from speakers aged 18–45 engaged in spontaneous face-to-face conversation, but the study also includes teenage speech and other types of discourse, such as phone calls.

In Chapter 4, the conversational, grammatical and prosodic properties relevant to the analysis are outlined and defined. The author also provides an overview of the relative frequencies of each property. For example, it is noted that, for the vast majority of the tokens, the TQs express epistemic modality, rather than deontic or dynamic modality. Furthermore, while the most common prosodic combination is falling pitch movement for both the anchor (e.g. *she is really fast*) and the tag (e.g. *isn't she?*), fall-rise and rise-fall are also relatively

common (p. 81). The aggregate figures are subsequently used to map out what constitutes a prototypical instance of a TQ, thereby differentiating between default and marked TQ properties. In addition to the aforementioned properties, other prototypical properties include the fact that most TQs elicit confirmation (they are typically positioned at the end of a turn) and that there is positive-negative polarity (i.e. that the negation is placed in the tag rather than in the anchor).

Chapter 5 focuses on the interactional dimension of TQs. Here, the author adds to and refines previous speech-function models and identifies six main categories: questions (*you're sure of that, are you?*), statements (*that wasn't very nice, was it?*), statement-question blends (*it's so big, isn't it?*), response TQs (*it is, isn't it?*), desired action TQs (*you will be careful with that, won't you?*) and TQs that are ambiguous between information stating and expressing a desired action (*we can do it after lunch, can't we?*). The statement-question blends make up the largest group, accounting for just under half of the total number of instances, followed by questions, response TQs and statements. It is also shown that the prosodic properties tend to differ across the categories investigated. Furthermore, a model of "the analytical choices that go into the classification of TQs into speech functions" is presented, where it is argued, among other things, that the commodity of exchange (information vs. desired action) is to be analyzed prior to the adjacency pair position (initiating vs. responding) and the direction (giving vs. demanding) (p. 124).

The sixth chapter outlines the stance dimension of TQs. The framework developed starts out from the notion that "TQs may be used by the speaker to signal either disalignment or alignment with regard to the common ground" (p. 135). Two main categories are proposed: instances that establish a common ground (*charming, isn't it?*) and instances that signal a break in the common ground (*you're not being serious, are you?*), along with 11 subcategories, such as 'emphatic counter-expectation', 'confirming' and 'joking'. It is further pointed out that there is no one-to-one correspondence between the two dimensions. Nonetheless, there is a certain degree of interplay between the grammatical, prosodic and conversational properties, such as the propensity of emphatic counter-expectation TQs (*it'll be years, will it?*) to exhibit rising pitch movement on the anchor or tag (including fall-rises) with a negative-positive or positive-negative polarity pattern.

In Chapter 7, the distribution across the three corpora is further explored with regard to the speech functions and stance types. Possible issues with regard to corpus comparability and generalizability of the results are also discussed. While all speech functions and stance types are represented in all three corpora, their distribution differs somewhat. For example, the teenagers whose produc-

tion is included in COLT tend to make comparatively more frequent use of *desired action TQs* and *responses*. There are also clear differences between the corpora when it comes to the prosodic properties investigated, which can partly be explained by the fact that these properties tend to be associated with certain TQ types. Some differences are further noted across time and age, whereas gender did not seem to have an impact on the results. The last chapter, Chapter 8, provides a detailed summary of the chapters. It also gives some suggestions for future studies, including an additional, textual dimension where the grammatical complexity of the anchor could be investigated, and an exploration of the interaction between TQs and other pragmatic markers.

I will now turn to an evaluation of the strengths and minor weaknesses of the book, starting with a couple of critical comments. The first pertains to the repercussions of the choice of corpora made. While it is of course fully understandable that the author had to work with available corpora that suited the aims of the study, the implications of using these particular corpora could perhaps have received more attention. For example, as the data used were collected between 1953 and 1993, they could perhaps be considered to be somewhat dated if the aim is to study present-day English. The fact that the analysis in Chapter 7 of the possible influence of time on the TQs investigated showed that the importance of this factor cannot be precluded (p. 202) makes this point even more pressing, as it may well be the case that the use of TQs has changed in the 25+ years that have gone past since the data were collected. Although this issue is discussed in Chapter 7, the fact remains that the data used can only be used to make *predictions* about what the current situation may look like. It would therefore have strengthened the line of argumentation if this issue was tested using some recently compiled data (even if a full analysis of these data would quite naturally fall outside the scope of the study).

Second, one of the stated aims of Chapter 7 is to test whether the results can be generalized to a larger population or whether possible corpus-specific uses “influence the distribution of certain property values” (p. 191). Separate investigations of the possible impact of, for example, gender, age and time are carried out using a Pearson chi-square test (by looking at the adjusted Pearson residuals). However, the make-up of the data is relatively complex, which means that the factors are difficult to tease apart (e.g. 96 % of the COLT data, which makes up the most recent data, is collected from teenagers, whereas LLC, the older data, is exclusively made up of adults’ speech). It would thus seem that a multivariate statistical analysis (also taking possible interactions into consideration) would have been preferable in order to draw more definite conclusions about to what extent the findings can be generalized beyond possible idiosyncrasies of

the conversation type and group of people whose production is included in each corpus. It would also have strengthened the argumentation if the author had included information about what the dispersion of the features looks like, as it is otherwise not clear whether some speakers' usage might have had an unduly large impact on the results.

However, these issues do not diminish the value of the study. I will now turn to some of the many strengths of the book. All in all, the book is exceptionally clearly structured and written in a very engaging and accessible style. Throughout this rigorous and well-researched volume, Kimps argues convincingly for the multifunctional nature of TQs, something that has been largely disregarded in previous works in the field. Distinguishing between the speech function (interactional) and rhetorical (stance) aspects of TQs enables the author to look further into the interplay of speakers' interactional position and what answer they expect vis-à-vis how speakers position themselves in relation to the attitudes of both the speaker and the hearer. In also adding the prosodic perspective, the author succeeds in painting a more complete picture than has previously been possible. Furthermore, by categorizing the functions of TQs into two parallel dimensions of interpersonal meaning (i.e. the interactional dimension and the stance dimension), the author consolidates and adds to previous work, and what emerges is an elegant typology of TQs, encompassing the grammatical, prosodic and conversational properties of TQs.

Another important strength of the book is that the analysis (and thus the conclusions drawn) are based on naturally occurring language, thereby not only providing frequency information of the different categories, but also enabling inclusion of less frequent functions that have gone unnoticed in previous studies. In addition, the careful analysis of the prosodic properties on these data has allowed the author to test assumptions made in previously proposed typologies of TQs, which further adds to the value of the volume. All in all, the book is an educational and rigorously researched account of English TQs of great interest to discourse analysts, phoneticians and researchers in semantics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics and neighboring fields, whether they are already doing research on TQs or are planning to embark on a similar project.

References

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