An analysis of “Is it?” and “Isn’t it?” as tag questions and their layered functions in discourse

Kari Bender

Abstract

This paper analyzes the functions and implications of tag questions in discourse, particularly questions using the subject “it” and the verb “is”. Specifically, we look at why a discourse participant chooses to use a tag like “Is it?” over its negation, “Isn’t it?”, and vice versa. For example

It’s gone, isn’t it?

It’s gone, is it?

are two utterances with the similar tag questions but with different implications in discourse. Additionally, these utterances have a different function from the statement “It is gone”, and the question “Is it gone?”. In this regard, tag questions serve as speech act modifiers to the utterance in which they are contained.

This paper will analyze occurrences of these tag questions in eleven different discourses from the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English. Although there are innumerable tag questions to explore, we will look specifically at occurrences of questions with the subject “it” and the verb “is”. For each occurrence we look at the context, the roles of the discourse participants, the preceding and following utterances, and the tag polarity, and try to determine function of the question.

Use of tag questions has previously been linked to gender, social standing, and context. Questions take on different meanings and purposes as these variables change. Analyzing these variables and the use of a specific tag question may give us insight into tag questions as a whole, the reason for their use, and their effect on a discourse.

Bibliography


