Tag questions: They’re interesting, aren’t they?

An analysis of reverse polarity tag questions and status.

A tag question, as defined by Cameron, McAlinden, & O’Leary is “grammatical structures in which a declarative is followed by an attached interrogative clause or ‘tag’.”

Tag questions in English are most commonly found with reverse polarity, where the anchor and tag have opposite polarity. For example, an anchor *It is raining*, we would find the tag question would be formed in the negative, *isn’t it?*, and the opposite, *it isn’t raining, is it?* Below are examples as found in Tottie & Hoffman, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anchor</th>
<th>Tag</th>
<th>Polarity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Makes you really think,</td>
<td>doesn’t it</td>
<td>Pos-Neg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh the ring’s not very valuable</td>
<td>it it?</td>
<td>Neg-Pos</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The question I am looking to further understand is how do tag questions have an effect on discourse? Through the different types of tag questions in English and using examples involving professors and students, I will be looking to see how the status and power of the speaker using the tag question could influence the discourse.

I looked at examples from varying sources and involving different kinds of people. Using Micase, I was able to find discourse examples where there were students and professors asking the tag questions in different contexts. In order to best understand how the status of the person asking the tag question had an effect on the discourse, I looked to find examples in varying contexts. Through COCA I am analyzing a variety of discourse examples on live talk shows, and am looking to see how the status of the host and guest, the speakers involved in the dialogue, will influence the conversation.
References


