

Surprising Tag Questions with Fragments in English

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1. Introduction

The tag question in the English language is a grammatical structure which can be added to the clause in conversation or in written representations of speech (Al-Nabtiti, 2012). Tag questions are syntactically, prosodically, and semantically complicated (Bennett, 1989; Holmes, 1982; Bublitz, 1979; Armagost, 1972). Tag questions diverge in form with different functions and intonation plays a major character in classifying them as tag questions (Bublitz, 1979). Most languages seem to have tag questions with different purposes. However, it is argued that canonical tag questions in the English language are complex and unique to the English language (Bublitz, 1979; Algeo, 1988; Culicover, 1992). Consequently, it is no surprise that the level of acceptability of an utterance/use of a tag question varies among native speakers of English. English tag questions involve pronouns and the form of the pronoun in a tag question is determined by the subject of the host clause as in (1) (Sailor, 2009).

(1) The lead actress in that movie lives in Belmont, do(es)n't {she/*he/*it/*they/*we}?

We extend our investigation in the use of the two main types of dependent tag questions presented by Barros and Van Craenenbroeck (2013); the regular tag and the cleft tag. The former involves the pronoun consistent with the pronoun in the host clause as in (1) while the latter is formed with a copula with 'it' (e.g., 'is it?').

(2) Types of tags

A: Someone left.

B: Yes, Jack, wasn't it? (cleft tag)

B': Yes, Jack, didn't he? (regular tag)

According to Barros & Van Craenenbroeck's (2013) observation, native speakers of English demonstrated preference in use of the cleft tag in object fragment answers as in (3) and (4).

(3) Object fragment

A: Bill met a member of the Linguistics Department.

B: Yes, Ken Safir, {wasn't it / ??didn't he}?

(4) Object fragment

A: Who can Bill talk to?

B: Ken Safir, {isn't it / ??can't he}?

Barros & Van Craenenbroeck (2013)

They argue that the object fragment answers in (3) and (4) are derived from a truncated cleft structure as in (5) and (6). This analysis serves as a ground to explain the preference of the cleft tag as shown in (3) and (4).

(5) Object fragment

A: Bill met a member of the Linguistics Department.

B: Yes, it was Ken Safir, wasn't it?

(6) Object fragment

A: Who can Bill talk to?

B: It is Ken Safir, isn't it?

We argue that the pronoun in the tag questions can also be affected by accenting/stressing between the subject and the object in the host clause as well as syntactic locality between the tag question and its referred content in the host clause.

2. Problems

Since Barros & Van Craenenbroeck's (2013) examples are limited to object fragment answer and its tag question, we extend the judgment test involving both subject and object fragment answer to see whether the use of the tag question is affected. We conducted an informal survey of 16 native speakers of English to observe the tendency in the use of the tag questions.

(7) Object fragment answer

A: Who can Bill talk to today?

B: Ken Safir, {??isn't it / can't he}?

(8) Subject fragment answer

A: Who can talk to Bill today?

B: Ken Safir, {?isn't it / can't he}?

According to the results of the judgment task, regardless of fragment types, the regular tag was more preferred over the cleft tag. This directly contradicts with Barros & Van Craenenbroeck's (2013) analysis that the fragment answer is derived from truncated cleft structure; the cleft tag is not a default preferred tag.

(9) Object fragment

A: Bill contacted a woman in the Linguistics Department yesterday.

B: Mary, {??wasn't it / ?didn't she}?

(10) Positive PAP + object fragment

A: Bill contacted a woman in the Linguistics Department yesterday.

B: Yes, Mary, {wasn't it / ??didn't she}?

(11) Subject fragment

A: A professor in the Linguistics Department interviewed Mary yesterday.

B: Bill, {??wasn't it / didn't he}?

(12) Positive PAP + subject fragment

A: A professor in the Linguistics Department interviewed Mary yesterday.

B: Yes, Bill, {wasn't it / ?didn't he}?

(13) Negative PAP + subject fragment

A: Bill contacted a woman in the Linguistics Department yesterday.

B: No, Mary, {wasn't it / ??didn't she}?

(14) Negative PAP + object fragment

A: A professor in the Linguistics Department interviewed Mary yesterday.

B: No, Bill, {wasn't it / ??didn't he}?

Polarity answer particles (PAP), *yes* and *no* seem to amplify the focus level on information. In object fragment answer without a PAP, the cleft tag was reported to be incompatible as in (9) while with a PAP, the cleft tag was highly preferred while the regular was reported to be ungrammatical as in (10) and (14). The similar phenomenon was observed involving subject fragment answer as in (12) and (13). As a result, the overt presence of the PAP seems to play a critical role in determining the tag preference.

3. Towards an analysis

3.1 Brief excursion to focus anchors followed by cleft tags: 'be(n't) + it'

(15) Cleft tag with focused element in the host clause

a. Mark wasn't arrested that MONDAY, was it?

b. Mr. Nelson usually smokes opium BEFORE class, isn't it?

c. Doug went home with that girl BAMBI, wasn't it?

(16) Underline source of cleft tag

a. Mark wasn't arrested that MONDAY, was it [that MONDAY that Mark was arrested]?

b. Mr. Nelson usually smokes opium BEFORE class, isn't it [BEFORE class that ...]?

c. Doug went home with that girl BAMBI, wasn't it [that girl BAMBI who Doug ...]?

d. The tiger mauled FIVE tourists, wasn't it [FIVE tourists that the tiger mauled]?

Sailor (2011)

While Sailor (2011) did not extend on the use of the regular tag, he provided data to show that the cleft tag in non-cleft structured host clause is associated with the most adjacent focused element of the host clause as in (16).

Barros & Van Craenenbroeck (2013), by contrast, showed that the regular tag is also compatible regardless of the adjacent focused element as in (17). In (17a), while the cleft tag *was it?* is directly associated with the focused anchor *MONDAY* as argued by Sailor (2011), the regular tag *was he?* is associated mainly with the subject *Mark*. As shown in (18), the

underline source of the regular tags refer to the subjects of the host clauses.

(17) Compatibility of the cleft and the regular tags

- a. Mark wasn't arrested that MONDAY, {was it / was he}?
- b. Mr. Nelson usually smokes opium BEFORE class, {isn't it / doesn't he}?
- c. Doug went home with that girl BAMBI, {wasn't it / didn't he}?

Barros & Van Craenenbroeck (2013)

(18) Underline source of the regular tags in (17)

- a. Mark wasn't arrested that MONDAY, was he [arrested that MONDAY]?
- b. Mr. Nelson usually smokes opium BEFORE class, doesn't he [usually smoke opium BEFORE class]?
- c. Doug went home with that girl BAMBI, didn't he [go home with that girl BAMBI]?

3.2 PAP-only answers and tags

We now extend our analysis to verify Barros & Van Craenenbroeck's (2013) view that the regular tag is compatible regardless of the overt presence of the focused element in the host clause. In the previous section, we have explained that the presence of the PAP amplifies the level of focus on information, resulting the preference of the cleft tags to follow. With PAP-only answer, the tag preference leans towards the regular tags.

(19) Positive PAP-only answer

- A: A professor in the Linguistics Department interviewed Mary yesterday.
 B: Yes, {?didn't he / ??wasn't it}?

(20) Positive PAP-only answer

- A: Bill contacted a woman in the Linguistics Department yesterday.
 B: Yes, {didn't he / ??wasn't it}?

(21) Negative PAP-only answer

- A: A professor in the Linguistics Department interviewed Mary yesterday.
 B: No, {did he / ??wasn't it}?

(22) Negative PAP-only answer

- A: Bill contacted a woman in the Linguistics Department yesterday.
 B: No, {?did he / ?*wasn't it}?

We argue that the PAP-only answer is insufficient to provide enough focus on information in order to allow for the cleft tag. Therefore, without typical fragments, they do not allow for cleft tags; the use of the cleft tag requires the presence of a fragment.

(23) The proposed analysis (tentative):

The use of the cleft tag is dependent on the presence of (the focus on) the anchor.

With the observed data and judgments, existence of the anchor with a focused element is a critical component to allow for the cleft tag as summarized in (23).

3.3 Providing an analysis for the basic paradigm

As argued so far, without the presence of the PAP, the information does not receive significant focus, thus the cleft tag is degraded over the regular tag as in (7) and (8). We test this hypothesis with different types of fragments.

(7) Object fragment answer

A: Who can Bill talk to today?

B: Ken Safir, {??isn't it / can't he}?

(8) Subject fragment answer

A: Who can talk to Bill today?

B: Ken Safir, {?isn't it / can't he}?

As shown in (13) and (14), negative PAP with fragment answer without any focused element resulted preference in the use of the cleft tag. When the fragment answer receives contrastive focus, despite the presence of the PAP, both tags seem compatible. As in (24) and (25), with negative PAP and contrastive-focused fragment answer, the degree of focus on information is relatively amplified than fragment answer without PAP as in (7) and (8), therefore, allows both types of tags.

3.4 Contrastive-focused fragment

(24) Negative PAP + focused object fragment

A: Did John meet SUSAN yesterday?

B: No, MARY, {?wasn't it / ?didn't he}?

(25) Negative PAP + focused subject fragment

A: Did SUSAN meet John yesterday?

B: No, MARY, {?wasn't it / ?didn't she}?

However, when the fragment answer is focused by the presence of the PAP as in (10) and (12), sufficient focus on information exists, thus only the cleft tag is highly preferred.

(10) Positive PAP + object fragment

A: Bill contacted a woman in the Linguistics Department yesterday.

B: Yes, Mary, {wasn't it / ??didn't he}?

(12) Positive PAP + subject fragment

A: A professor in the Linguistics Department interviewed Mary yesterday.

B: Yes, Bill, {wasn't it / ?didn't he}?

Based on our findings, the presence of the PAP seems to be a significant source of determining the focus level of information.

(26) The proposed analysis (final):

The use of the cleft tag is dependent on the presence of (the 'stronger information' focus

on) the anchor.

4. Extension: right-dislocated/stripped fragments and tags

We extend our analysis on how syntactic locality affects the use of the tags. When cleft tags are applied to right dislocated and contrastive stripped sentences, they are subject to stringent locality effect.

4.1 Right Dislocation (RD)

(27) Right dislocated object

John saw her_i yesterday, Mary_i, {didn't he / wasn't it}?

(28) Right dislocated subject

He_i saw Mary yesterday, John_i, {?didn't he / *wasn't it}?

The regular tags in (27) and (28) both associate with the subjects *John* in (27) and *He* in (28), therefore locality effect is not applicable. On the other hand, the cleft tag is only compatible in (27) as it can only associate with the adjacent element, *Mary*.

(29) Underline source of the cleft tag in (27)

John saw her_i yesterday, Mary_i, wasn't it [Mary_i that John saw yesterday]?

Because the cleft tag and its associated element *Mary* is directly adjacent to each other without any interference, it allows the use of the cleft tag. By contrast, the cleft tag is incompatible in (28) since the object *Mary* is an interference factor to satisfy the locality between the cleft tag and the right dislocated subject *John*.

4.2 Contrastive Stripping (CS)

(29) Contrastive stripped object

John didn't see SUSAN yesterday, but MARY, {did(n't) he / wasn't it}?

(30) Contrastive stripped subject

Never does SUSAN see me, but MARY, {?didn't she / *wasn't it}?

In contrastive stripped sentences, similar behavior is observed. While the regular tags are compatible without subject/object asymmetry, the use of the cleft tag is determined by the syntactic locality between the tag and the stripped object. The cleft tag in (29) is compatible since it is directly adjacent to the stripped element *MARY*. By contrast, the cleft tag in (30) is ungrammatical since the locality is violated by the presence of the subject *MARY*.

In sum, the cleft tag is sensitive to the locality/immediacy between the hosting clause and the RD-ed/CS-ed element [subject vs. object asymmetry].

5. Conclusion

The use of the cleft tag is dependent on the presence of (the 'stronger information' focus on) the anchor. Incidentally, the cleft tag is generally rated a little better with the object anchor/fragment versus with the subject anchor/fragment. This reflects locality between the cleft tag and its associated anchor/fragment. The cleft tag is sensitive to the locality/immediacy between the hosting clause and the RD-ed/CS-ed element, demonstrating asymmetry between subject and object.

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