

Invariant Question Tags in Asian and African Varieties of English

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Abstract: *Tag questions are a cross-linguistically attested phenomenon typical of spoken conversation and they occur either as canonical or as non-canonical. In contrast to previous research on invariant question tags in the spoken language, this paper aims to document the diversity of non-canonical tags in informal written texts, namely in blogs, the text type most similar to informal spoken language. We will examine the data from several varieties of English spoken in South and Southeast Asia and Africa that share a significant degree of resemblance, owing to British colonialism in these areas. Research results, based on the data available in the Global Web-based English corpus, are reported for the frequencies of occurrence of invariable tags.*

Keywords: *invariant question tags; canonical tags; lexical tags; English varieties; GloWbE.*

1. Introduction

In the discussion on the types of question tags, distinction is made between canonical and non-canonical tags. In terms of formal properties, canonical English question tags are sensitive to three main factors: the choice of auxiliary and pronoun, polarity (negation), and intonation pattern, and are, therefore, variant. In addition to the canonical tags, English offers a range of invariant tags such as *isn't it?*, *innit?*, *right?*, *eh?* and others, available in varieties spoken worldwide.

In this paper the emphasis is on invariant question tags that occur in several varieties of English spoken in South and Southeast Asia and in Africa. The common feature of these English varieties is that English is spoken as a second language by multilingual speakers, who are also fluent in the official language and the local regional dialects.

From a morpho-syntactic point of view, L2 English varieties in Africa-Asia show a high degree of similarity, owing to the linguistic impact of British colonialism in these areas (Mesthrie 2004: 1132). Furthermore, there is a noteworthy tendency in these varieties towards simplification of grammatical structures, favoured by various social factors, such as lack of formal education, certain restrictions on the speakers' behaviour, the new communication channels and others.

This cross-variety study relies on the data provided by the Corpus of Global Web-Based English (abbreviated as GloWbE) and it is aimed at bringing evidence in support of the claim that the use of invariant question tags emerges as a prevailing tendency in L2 Englishes spoken in South and Southeast Asia and in Africa.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 gives a brief overview of previous corpus-based studies of variant and invariant tags in L1 and L2 Englishes. Section 3 deals with relevant research on invariant question tags in several Asian and African varieties of English and provides illustrative examples selected from the GloWbE corpus. Section 4 introduces the methodology used for the analysis of the corpus data. In section 5 we present the quantitative findings, followed by a comparative analysis across varieties and by prospects for further research. The paper concludes with relevance remarks.

2. Corpus-based studies of question tags

Question tags have been defined in terms of structure and polarity. Structurally, tags are made up of an auxiliary and pronoun duplication, *do*-insertion, or reversed polarity. (Biber et al. 1999: 208-210, Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 892-895). The tense of the operator (auxiliary or modal) strictly depends on the verb in the main sentence, also called anchor or host.

Polarity refers to whether the host sentence, the tag or both have positive or negative elements. Contrasting or reversed polarity tags occur when the anchor is affirmative and the tag is negative, or vice versa. Constant or matching polarity tags have the same polarity as the host sentence.

Most previous corpus-based research (Tottie and Hoffmann 2006, Barron et al 2015, Axelsson 2018, among others) has focused on canonical tags in L1 Englishes, with emphasis on their formal realization or on their pragmatic functions. Several studies have also investigated variant question tags in L2 Englishes, for example in Hong Kong English (Wong, 2007), in four Asian Englishes (Parviainen, 2016 and Takahashi, 2016), etc.. Most of these studies use the set of corpora in the International Corpus of English and compare their findings to variant question tag use in British, American, or Canadian English.

In addition to the studies on variant question tags, several research reports have drawn attention to the invariant tags in varieties of English worldwide. Thus, Columbus (2010) studies a broad range of invariant question tag forms across British, New Zealand, Indian, Singapore, and Hong Kong English using the ICE corpora. She shows that there is a high frequency of invariant question tags in all five varieties and significant regional variation with regard to individual forms.

Takahashi (2016) compares the use of invariant question tags in four Asian countries: India, Singapore, Hong Kong, and the Philippines. It is argued that each country uses a mix of indigenous (those that both originate and are used in a local non-English language) and non-indigenous (those also used in English monolingual countries) question tags.

As for the similarities among these varieties of English, Columbus (2009) and Takahashi (2016) suggest that modern invariant question tags in English may originate in language contact, as the English speakers are multilingual in these geographical areas.

Most of these studies on variant and invariant question tags have focused on the spoken material available in ICE corpora.

In this study we will make use of the data selected from the GloWbE corpus, where 60% of the texts are illustrative of informal written web content, mainly blogs, in different varieties of English.

3. Invariant question tags in Asian and African varieties of English

The use of invariant tags is a distinctive feature in Asian and African varieties of English (Kortmann & Szmrecsanyi 2004). Mesthrie (2008: 630) regards the use of invariant tags as "another overwhelming rule in L2 Englishes", available in six out of twelve African and four out of five South and Southeast Asian varieties. Unlike canonical question tags, which have a variable form, invariant question tags have a fixed form and often include single words, such as *right?*, multi-word units, such as *you know?*, or phonological sequences, such as *eh?*.

The following section comprises a brief overview of the main types of invariant question tags, with an emphasis on three English varieties spoken in Asia (Indian English, Singapore English, Malaysian English) and three varieties in Africa (Ghanaian English, Kenyan English, Tanzanian English). Illustrative examples, selected from the GloWbE corpus, will demonstrate that, whereas invariant tags are common in spoken language, they may also be found in informal written web texts, represented by blog texts available in this corpus.

3.1. The invariant tag *isn't it* ?

The invariant tag *isn't it?* is one of the most common tags in vernacular Indian English. It occurs with a fixed structure, undifferentiated with regard to the grammatical categories of the subject and of the verb in the anchor:

1)

- a. Definitely the price of your services go up, **isn't it?**
(GloWbE: India, Blog: External factors to consider before starting an online business)

- b. these sorts of thoughts are fewer and fewer, **isn't it?**

(GloWbE: India, Blog, Forgiveness is not a sign of weakness - Sri Sri Ravi Shankar)

- c. ...some good reviews...would have come as an icing on the cake,
isn't it?

(GloWbE: India, Blog: Things seemed to be finally picking up; Fesha Koppikhar)

Thus, the invariant tag *isn't it?* is attached to main clauses with verbs in the indicative mood, present simple in (1a,b), or in the conditional mood in (1c).

As shown in Bhatt (2004:1021), the tag *isn't it?* has a special social function and a separate meaning compared to the rest of the sentence. Undifferentiated tags show how Indian culture is constrained by the social rules related to deference and politeness. In vernacular Indian English, this tag is used with a mitigated tendency:

2)

You said you'll finish the work, **isn't it?**

They said they will buy the tickets, **isn't it?**

In Standard English, people use the canonical tags with an intensified tone, as do speakers of formal Indian English:

3)

You said you'll finish the work, **didn't you?**

They said they will buy the tickets, **didn't they?**

The Indian people consider that examples in (3), compared to those in (2), have a negative connotation and express an impositional tendency, which, in terms of the constraints on the verbal behaviour in their culture, is not normal and moral (Mesthrie & Bhatt 2008: 134). This intuition is intensified if an adverb of intensification is added to the anchor, which is unacceptable to Indian people:

4)

Of course you said you'll finish the work, **didn't you?**

Of course they said they will buy the tickets, **didn't they?**

The grammar of the vernacular Indian English allows and encourages the use of the undifferentiated tag in order to respect the verbal behaviour of the speakers.

The negative invariant form *isn't it?* is also frequently used by speakers of Singapore English to ask for agreement from the recipient:

5)

I know the difference is a lot but unemployment rates went down
isn't it?

(GloWbE, Singapore English, Blog, Obama won the Election! Theresa's)

Deterding (2007:56) states that the invariant use of the final tags *is it?*, respectively *isn't it?*, is preferred even in formal speech and most Singapore English speakers tend to respond to questions rather than ask them:

6)

She think I want to listen to her tale, **is it?**

It doesn't matter what they think so much of you if you have a clear conscience, **isn't it?**

Malaysian speakers of English favour the use of invariant tags in informal spoken language, as well as in personal blogs, as illustrated below:

7)

You want a date, **isn't it?**

(GloWbE: Malaysian, Blog: Tips on how to get a date with a girl who is a total stranger)

...I cherished this experience because only by travelling free-and-easy that you could get this authentic experience, **isn't it?**

(GloWbE: Malaysian, Blog: Hong Kong, The Melting Pot of Asians & Caucasians: Estuary Of)

The invariant tag *isn't it?* is also employed by speakers of East African varieties of English, who often tend to use this tag to make sure that the interlocutor is paying attention (Schmied, 2004: 935). This tendency is also noticeable in informal writing in Tanzanian English:

8)

Anyway the world have been saved, **isn't it?**

(GloWbE: Tanzania, Blog: ossblog: Can you see the FOSS around you?)

On the other hand, the invariant *isn't it?* rarely occurs in the West African variety of English spoken in Ghana (Huber, Dako, 2004), and even less frequently in informal writing:

9)

I didn't want to single out any personality for praise but I think that will not be fair, **isn't it?**

(GloWbE: Ghana, Blog: A passion for promoting the women's – Basketball Ghana)

As it can be noticed, the tag *isn't it?* can be found either after affirmative, as in (8), or after negative anchors, as in (9).

A reduction of the non-canonical *isn't it so?* or *isn't that so?* is the invariant tag *not so?*, rarely encountered in blogs written in the African varieties - Ghanaian English and Tanzanian English:

10)

We'd rather the entire project was commercially self-sustainable and a great revolving mechanism to deepen our real estate market, **not so?**
(GloWbE: Ghana, Blog – IMANI Special Report on the STX-Ghana Deal, AfricanLiberty.org)

3.2. The invariant tag *is it?*

In colloquial Singapore English, verb conjugations are missing and the auxiliary system is not so complex. The reduced auxiliary system leads to the formation of simpler tag questions (Wee 2004: 1060):

11)

She leaving the house, **is it?**
They leaving the house, **is it?**

12) She not leaving the house, **is it?**

They not leaving the house, **is it?**

As it can be noticed, the tag is attached to main clauses with a missing progressive auxiliary. The invariant, neutral form *is it?* is employed in informal Singapore English regardless of the gender and the person of the subject or of the main verb tense. It is also used with both affirmative and negative anchors:

13)

You got nothing to do, **is it?**
(GloWbE: Malaysia, Blog: Japanese Dorama Memories – The World Of Simon Lover!)

3.3. The invariant tag phrase *can or not?*

In Malaysian English, there are only two forms of invariant tag questions, which are represented by the polarity-based tags *is it?* and *isn't it?* and the tag phrase *can or not?*:

14)

haven't i already have a lot to handle? give the next boss settle **can or not?**
(GloWbE: Malaysia, General, h.3.1.3.n)

The tag phrase *can or not?* is similar to *yes/no* questions in Standard British English and carries a shade of modal meaning:

15)

- a. I want to come, **can or not?**
'Can I come?'
- b. They must finish the project tomorrow, **can or not?**
'Must they finish the project tomorrow?'
- c. You carry this for me, **can or not?**

‘Will you carry this for me?’

Baskaran (2004: 1079) notes that the tag phrase *can or not?* is used by Malaysian people with various functions, among them: asking permission, as in (15a), confirming ability in (15b) and assessing volition in (15c). This language-specific invariant tag has not been adopted in any other African variety of English.

3.4. Single-word question tags

Apart from the canonical tags and the invariant *isn't it? / is it?* Indian English also uses the indigenous monomorphemic (and monosyllabic) tags *na/ no*, which are invariant negative particles derived from Hindi, as source language. In Hindi-Urdu, the parallel structure consists of a single clause with a post-posed particle which is invariably *na*:

16)

I think the trick is to use a lighter one for oily skin, **na**?

(GloWbE: India: General, How To Make Lemon Peel Face Scrub – Do It Yourself)

So this news should bring a smile to the faces of Sal-Kat's fans and give them a reason to dance with joy, **na**?

(GloWbE: India: General, Do you want to see Salman Khan-Katrina Kaif together again)

Though the tendency in Indian English is to use *isn't it?* as a universal question tag, *no?* is viewed as another option. In a detailed account of the functions of indigenous tags, Lange (2012: 206) argues that *no/na* tags are widely used by speakers of standard Indian English, but they are not readily acknowledged as being part of the (spoken) standard. The invariable tag *na* is also found in formal writing in Singapore English and Malaysian English:

17)

But, though it sounds credible to argue that a well-managed laboratory can be safe most of the time, it would be, **na**?

(GloWbE, Singapore: General, Abdication of Responsibility for Biosafety in the Name of Free Trade)

Let me give you a hint: blame it too on the Army, easy **na**?

(GloWbE, Malaysia: General, Away from the family)

Monomorphemic tags *no?*, *na?*, *eh?* are also encountered in varieties of African English, under the influence of the native dialects of the speakers, in which structures similar to the English tags are not available:

18)

So I feel the first step is to let it out, so I can, kinda, like, script my confrontation, **no**?

(GloWbE, Kenya, Blog: Blessed, amusing and genius: Hateration)

Of course it would haudio-videoe to be Cousin Bo the dashing brown-eyed slightly, **na**?

(GloWbE: Tanzania, blog, eennu.com)

You also want to leave Ghana for the United States, **eh**?

‘you also want to leave Ghana for the United States, don’t you?’

(GloWbE: 87 Ghana, general, ghanaweb.com, feature art. 2010)

Trust you Udi, the pints have to take priority over everything else, **eh**?

(GloWbE: Kenya, Blog, How is one meant to get things done in this country?)

The reduced tag *not so?* has other correspondents in many African languages (Schmied 2004: 935), such as *sivyo?* in Kiswahili, the local name of Swahili, a Bantu language spoken by the Swahili people who inhabit the East African coast:

19)

never imagined showing such madharau to a cop before. But he deserved it, **sivyo**?

(GloWbE: Kenya, Blog- How to deal with a stupid cop)

In this section we have outlined the main types of invariant tags identifiable in several South and Southeast Asian and African varieties of English and we have brought evidence from the GloWbE corpus that such tags are available, not only in conversation, as has been commonly claimed, but also in informal writing, as demonstrated by the blog excerpts.

4. Methodology

The only corpora that provide data on varieties of English worldwide, organized in a way that allows researchers to compare across these dialects are the International Corpus of English (see Greenbaum 1996) and the Corpus of Global Web-Based English (released in 2013).

Most previous cross-variety studies of question tags mainly rely on the spoken material made available in ICE corpus. However, we chose to use the GloWbE corpus to gain a distinct viewpoint on the research issue, namely the employment of invariant question tags in informal written online content, particularly in blog texts written in different English varieties.

GloWbE is different from the ICE not only in terms of the text types stored, but also in size and in the number of varieties envisaged. GloWbE has

about 1.9 billion words of data, from 20 countries. The texts come from general web pages, as well as from blogs, typically very colloquial. GloWbE is, in size, more than 100 times as large as ICE.

The GloWbE corpus comprises twenty varieties of English grouped into two categories: the inner circle varieties of English and the outer circle varieties of English, including the varieties under study in this research (Indian English, Singapore English, Malaysian English, Ghanaian English, Kenyan English, Tanzanian English).

To collect material for the cross-variety study of non-canonical, invariant tag questions, we carried out corpus searches that generated the instances of the question tags mentioned in the previous section. However, the search for the question tags, especially for: *isn't it?* and *is it?*, turned up examples where these tags were either variant or invariant; therefore, to separate the invariant examples from the variant ones, a manual selection of examples was performed. Furthermore, since the paper focuses on informal writing, we avoided the web pages of general interest, usually online newspapers, which typically employ formal language, and selected only the examples of invariant tags derived from blogs.

The analysis of the frequency of such patterns indicates trends in the use of invariant tags and combines a quantitative analysis with a qualitative one to offer some insight into the use of invariant tags in informal written texts.

5. Research findings

The results of the search for non-canonical tags in the blog texts that are available in the GloWbE corpus are given in Table 1, for three English varieties spoken in the South and Southeast Asia and three African English varieties. The table lists seven types of invariant question tags, ordered according to the number of occurrences, with the highest number at the top and the lowest at the bottom.

Table 1. *Frequency of invariant question tags in blogs*

Invariant question tag	Indian English (IN)	Malaysian English (MY)	Singapore English (SG)	Tanzanian English (TZ)	Ghanaian English (GH)	Kenyan English (KE)	Total
no?	47	69	57	5	14	26	218
isn't it?	28	18	15	6	6	9	82
is it?	6	5	7	3	1	1	23
not so?	0	0	0	1	3	4	8
na?	6	0	0	1	0	0	7
can or not?	0	3	3	0	0	0	6

sivyo?	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
Total	87	95	82	16	24	42	346

Source: Authors' contribution based on the data selected from *GloWbE* corpus, (released in 2013).

The search for invariant tags in the *GloWbE* corpus has yielded a total of 346 tokens in the selected varieties of English. The examination of the research finding provides information about the different ranking of the invariant tags, in overall figures, their distribution within each variety, as well as the opportunity to compare the data across the six English varieties.

The data gathered about the occurrence of invariant question tags exhibits the total number of occurrences of the different **types of invariant question tags in blog texts**. Thus, the data collected show that the monosyllabic tag *no?* ranks highest in all columns, i.e. in both groups of English varieties, although the selected Asian varieties display much higher overall numbers than the African varieties. The tag *no?* appears in all varieties under study with a total number of 218 attested occurrences, the second highest in frequency is the invariant tag *isn't it?* with 82 instances, and the third one is *is it?* with 23 tokens.

As expected, the lowest frequency is encountered with the language-specific tags, for example, the tag *na?* in Indian English, the Malaysian tag *can or not?*, occasionally encountered in Singapore English, both with 6 occurrences and the Kenyan tag *sivyo?*, with only 2 attested occurrences.

The table also reveals **the distribution of invariant tags for each variety**. Thus, speakers of Indian English mainly use two types of invariant tags: *no?* and *isn't it?*. The monomorphemic tag *no?* ranks highest, with 47 occurrences, almost half of the total number of invariant tag instances (87), followed by *isn't it?*, with 28 occurrences.

In Malaysian English, the prevailing invariant tags are *no?* and *isn't it?*, with *no?* found in 69 instances, more than three times the number of occurrences for the invariant tag *isn't it?* (18).

Singapore English data also reveals higher numbers for the invariant tag *no?* (57), and three times fewer occurrences for the tag *isn't it?* (15).

The African English varieties display lower numbers of occurrences for invariant tags: Kenyan English 42, Ghanaian English 24 and Tanzanian English 16. In Kenyan English the highest position is held by that tag *no?*, with 26 occurrences, followed by the tags *isn't it?*, only occasionally employed. The Ghanaian English data reveals significantly lower numbers for the invariant tag *no?* (14) and half as many for *isn't it?* (6). The Tanzanian English data displays few occurrences of the invariant tags *no?* and *isn't it?*.

Additionally, the table provides useful data for a **comparative examination** of the frequency of occurrence of non-canonical tags in the two groups of English varieties under investigation.

Thus, the monomorphemic tag *no?* has a higher prevalence in the Asian varieties of English: Indian (47 occurrences), Malaysian (69) and Singapore English (57) than in the African varieties, where the total number of attested occurrences is lower (45). The second highest number of occurrences is for the invariant tag *isn't it?*, with 61 tokens found for the three Asian varieties of English, in contrast to 21 tokens identified for the three selected African varieties. This difference in prevalence between the tags *no?* and *isn't it?* points to the speakers' inclination towards simplification of grammatical structures.

There are two invariant tags available either only in the Asian varieties of English or in the African ones. Thus, the phrasal tag *can or not?* has a low frequency, with only 6 attested occurrences in Malaysian English and Singapore English, while in the African varieties of English, it is non-existent. On the other hand, the reduced tag *not so?*, with 8 occurrences, can only be encountered in the African English varieties. The language specific tag *sivyo?* ranks lowest.

These findings about the relative frequency of non-canonical tags have helped us set up a tentative ranking of invariant question tags based on the preferences of the bloggers who write in South and Southeast Asian or in African varieties of English. Overall, the collected data also clearly indicate that there is an inclination for the use of the invariable tags *no?* and *isn't it?*, in the South and Southeast Asian varieties of English rather than in the African ones. The difference in the prevalence of tags is primarily attributable to tendency for the reduction of tags and to the restrictive social factors impacting the speech behaviour of the Asian speakers of English.

Further study on this issue will explore other invariant question tags, particularly the monomorphemic ones, as well as the data from the remaining African and Asian varieties of English, available in the GloWbE corpus.

Moreover, the contrastive analysis needs to be supplemented with a pragmatic approach that can appropriately account for the choice of a given invariant tag in a certain linguistic and social context.

6. Conclusion

This paper investigated the relative frequencies of the invariant tags in informal web texts, represented by the blog text type, written in several English varieties. The comparative analysis of the data derived from the GloWbE corpus allowed us to identify the most and the least widely attested types of invariant question tags and to draw a parallel between the frequency of occurrence of non-canonical tags in several Asian and African varieties of

English. Of the seven types of invariant tags selected from the non-standard varieties of English spoken in South and Southeast Asia and Africa, the most common ones are: *no?* and *isn't it?*.

These findings extend prior research on invariant question tags based on spoken corpora with data from written online texts, namely blog writings, which are thought to be the text type closest to the spoken language.

The use of invariant question tags in blog texts is in line with the overall tendency for the simplification of grammar in the L2 Englishes.

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