

# English Tags



English Tags:  
A Close-Up on Film Language,  
Dubbing and Conversation

By

Veronica Bonsignori

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

---

P U B L I S H I N G

English Tags:  
A Close-Up on Film Language, Dubbing and Conversation,  
by Veronica Bonsignori

This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2013 by Veronica Bonsignori

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-5223-6, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-5223-4

*To my son*



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	viii
List of Tables.....	x
Acknowledgments .....	xii
List of Abbreviations .....	xiii
Chapter One.....	1
Introduction	
Chapter Two.....	7
A Syntactic Description of English Question Tags and Invariant Tags	
Chapter Three .....	35
Pragmatic Functions of Tags: A General Overview	
Chapter Four.....	54
A Syntactic, Pragmatic and Prosodic Analysis of Tags in Film Language	
Chapter Five .....	131
Tags in Italian Dubbing and Original Filmic Speech	
Chapter Six.....	204
Conclusions	
Bibliography.....	213
Filmography and Websites .....	229

## LIST OF FIGURES

- 3-1 Complexity of TQs.
- 4-1 Distribution of QTs and ITs in *Secrets & Lies*.
- 4-2 Frequency of RPTs vs. CPTs in *Secrets & Lies*.
- 4-3 Frequency distribution of QTs *stricto sensu* in *Secrets & Lies*.
- 4-4 Distribution of QTs and ITs in *The Full Monty*.
- 4-5 Frequency of RPTs vs. CPTs in *The Full Monty*.
- 4-6 Frequency distribution of QTs *stricto sensu* in *The Full Monty*.
- 4-7 Distribution of QTs and ITags in *Sliding Doors*.
- 4-8 Frequency of RPTs vs. CPTs in *Sliding Doors*.
- 4-9 Frequency distribution of QTs *stricto sensu* in *Sliding Doors*.
- 4-10 Distribution of QTs and ITs in *About a Boy*.
- 4-11 Frequency of RPTs vs. CPTs in *About a Boy*.
- 4-12 Frequency distribution of QTs *stricto sensu* in *About a Boy*.
- 4.13 Proportional distribution of frequency of QTs and ITs in all films.
- 4-14 Distribution of RPT vs. CPT in all films.
- 4-15 Proportional distribution of frequency of +/- vs. -/+ RPTs in all films.
- 4-16 Frequency of Tag-imperatives in all films.
- 4-17 Intonational patterns of QTs *stricto sensu* in *Secrets & Lies*.
- 4-18 Falling *innit* (21) with a confirmatory function (*Secrets & Lies*).
- 4-19 Rising RPT (22) with a confirmatory function (*Secrets & Lies*).
- 4-20 Falling RPT (26) with a rhetorical function (*Secrets & Lies*).
- 4-21 Falling RPT (27) with aggressive function (*Secrets & Lies*).
- 4-22 Rising RPT (28) with aggressive function (*Secrets & Lies*).
- 4-23 Rising RPT (30) with informational function (*Secrets & Lies*).
- 4-24 Functions of QTs and ITs in *Secrets & Lies*.
- 4-25 Intonational patterns of QTs *stricto sensu* in *The Full Monty*.
- 4-26 RPT (36) with high falling pattern associated to the aggressive function (*The Full Monty*).
- 4-27 Tag-imperative (38) with rising pattern functioning as aggravator (*The Full Monty*).
- 4-28 RPT (39) with high fall pattern associated to the confirmatory function (*The Full Monty*).
- 4-29 RPT (42) with low rising pattern associated to the informational function (*The Full Monty*).
- 4-30 Functions of QTs and ITs in *The Full Monty*.
- 4-31 Intonational patterns of QTs *stricto sensu* in *Sliding Doors*.
- 4-32 Low Rise RPT (49a) associated to the informational function (*Sliding Doors*).
- 4-33 High Fall RPT (49b) associated to the confirmatory function (*Sliding Doors*).



- 4-34 High Fall RPT (50) associated to the aggressive function (*Sliding Doors*).
- 4-35 Functions of QTs and ITs in *Sliding Doors*.
- 4-36 Intonational patterns of QTs *stricto sensu* in *About a Boy*.
- 4-37 High Fall RPT (56) associated to the aggressive function (*About a Boy*).
- 4-38 High fall RPT (59a) associated to the confirmatory/aggressive function (*About a Boy*).
- 4-39 High fall RPT (59b) associated to the confirmatory/aggressive function (*About a Boy*).
- 4-40 Rising tag-imperative (60) functioning as aggravator (*About a Boy*).
- 4-41 Functions of QTs and ITs in *About a Boy*.
- 4-42 Intonational patterns of QTs *stricto sensu* in all films.
- 5-1 Translating options of QTs in the Italian dub in *Secrets & Lies*.
- 5-2 Translating options of ITs in the Italian dub in *Secrets & Lies*.
- 5-3 Translating options of QTs and ITs in the Italian dub in *Secrets & Lies*.
- 5-4 Translating options of QTs in the Italian dub in *The Full Monty*.
- 5-5 Translating options of ITs in the Italian dub in *The Full Monty*.
- 5-6 Translating options of QTs and ITs in the Italian dub in *The Full Monty*.
- 5-7 Translating options of QTs in the Italian dub in *Sliding Doors*.
- 5-8 Translating options of ITs in the Italian dub in *Sliding Doors*.
- 5-9 Translating options of QTs and ITs in the Italian dub in *Sliding Doors*.
- 5-10 Translating options of QTs in the Italian dub in *About a Boy*.
- 5-11 Translating options of ITs in the Italian dub in *About a Boy*.
- 5-12 Translating options of QTs and ITs in the Italian dub in *About a Boy*.
- 5-13 Translating options of QTs in the Italian dub of all films.
- 5-14 Translating options of ITs in the Italian dub of all films.
- 5-15 Translating options of QTs and ITs in the Italian dub of all films.
- 5-16 Strategies used when tags are not transposed in the Italian dub of all films.
- 5-17 Strategies (%) used when tags are not transposed in the Italian dub of all films.
- 5-18 Frequency of Italian equivalent expressions to English tags in *Ovosodo*.
- 5-19 Frequency of Italian equivalent expressions to English tags in *L'Ultimo Bacio*.
- 5-20 Frequency of Italian equivalent expressions to English tags in *Santa Maradona*.
- 5-21 Frequency of Italian equivalent expressions to English tags in *Casomai*.

## LIST OF TABLES

- 2-1 Classification of the syntactic types of TQs and ITs.
- 3-1 Functions of tags on the basis of Holmes (1985), Algeo (2006) and Millar and Brown (1979)'s classification.
- 3-2 Classification of the functions of tags in the present work. S=Speaker; A=Addressee; *p*=proposition.
- 4-1 The Corpus: The English component.
- 4-2 Use of tags in relation to characters in *Secrets & Lies*.
- 4-3 Types of ITs in *Secrets & Lies*.
- 4-4 Syntactic description of tags in *Secrets & Lies*.
- 4-5 Use of tags in relation to characters in *The Full Monty*.
- 4-6 Types of ITs in *The Full Monty*.
- 4-7 Syntactic description of tags in *The Full Monty*.
- 4-8 Use of tags in relation to characters in *Sliding Doors*.
- 4-9 Syntactic description of tags in *Sliding Doors*.
- 4-10 Use of tags in relation to characters in *About a Boy*.
- 4-11 Syntactic description of tags in *About a Boy*.
- 4-12 Types of Tag-imperatives in all films.
- 4-13 Syntactic and prosodic description of TQs in *Secrets & Lies*.
- 4-14 Distribution of the primary pragmatic functions of TQs on the basis of their syntactic and prosodic patterns in *Secrets & Lies*.
- 4-15 Distribution of the primary pragmatic functions of ITs in *Secrets & Lies*.
- 4-16 Syntactic and prosodic description of TQs in *The Full Monty*.
- 4-17 Distribution of the primary pragmatic functions of TQs on the basis of their syntactic and prosodic patterns in *The Full Monty*.
- 4-18 Distribution of the primary pragmatic functions of ITs in *The Full Monty*.
- 4-19 Syntactic and prosodic description of TQs in *Sliding Doors*.
- 4-20 Distribution of the primary pragmatic functions of TQs on the basis of their syntactic and prosodic patterns in *Sliding Doors*.
- 4-21 Distribution of the primary pragmatic functions of ITs in *Sliding Doors*.
- 4-22 Syntactic and prosodic description of TQs in *About a Boy*.
- 4-23 Distribution of the primary pragmatic functions of TQs on the basis of their syntactic and prosodic patterns in *About a Boy*.
- 4-24 Distribution of the primary pragmatic functions of ITs in *About a Boy*.
- 4-25 Syntactic and prosodic description of TQs in all films.
- 4-26 Distribution of the primary pragmatic functions of TQs on the basis of their syntactic and prosodic patterns in all films.
- 4-27 Distribution of the primary pragmatic functions of invariant tags in all films.
- 4-28 Frequency and types of ITs in film language vs. spontaneous conversation.
- 4-29 Tag-imperatives in film language vs. spontaneous conversation.

- 4-30 Tag types in tag-imperatives in film language vs. spontaneous conversation.
- 5-1 Translating options of QTs in the Italian dub of *Secrets & Lies*.
- 5-2 Translating options of ITs in the Italian dub of *Secrets & Lies*.
- 5-3 Translating options of QTs and ITs in the Italian dub of *Secrets & Lies*.
- 5-4 Translating options of QTs in the Italian dub of *The Full Monty*.
- 5-5 Translating options of ITs in the Italian dub of *The Full Monty*.
- 5-6 Translating options of QTs and ITs in the Italian dub of *The Full Monty*.
- 5-7 Translating options of QTs in the Italian dub of *Sliding Doors*.
- 5-8 Translating options of ITs in the Italian dub of *Sliding Doors*.
- 5-9 Translating options of QTs and ITs in the Italian dub of *Sliding Doors*.
- 5-10 Translating options of QTs in the Italian dub of *About a Boy*.
- 5-11 Translating options of ITs in the Italian dub of *About a Boy*.
- 5-12 Translating options of QTs and ITs in the Italian dub of *About a Boy*.
- 5-13 Translating options of QTs in the Italian dub of all films.
- 5-14 Translating options of ITs in the Italian dub of all films.
- 5-15 Translating options of QTs and ITs in the Italian dub of all films.
- 5-16 The Corpus: The Italian component.
- 5-17 Italian equivalent expressions to English tags in original Italian film language (*Ovosodo*).
- 5-18 Italian equivalent expressions to English tags in original Italian film language (*L'Ultimo Bacio*).
- 5-19 Italian equivalent expressions to English tags in original Italian film language (*Santa Maradona*).
- 5-20 Italian equivalent expressions to English tags in original Italian film language (*Casomai*).
- 5-21 Italian equivalent expressions to English tags in original Italian film language (all films).
- 5-22 Italian equivalent expressions to English tags in a corpus of spontaneous Italian spoken language (BADIP).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My first and deepest thanks go to Prof. Silvia Bruti, without whom this book would not have been possible. I thank her for reading the whole manuscript, for her precious comments as well as for her support and encouragement.

I would like to acknowledge the debt I owe to Prof. Lavinia Merlini Barbaresi who suggested me to study English tags during my PhD, which she supervised, and to Prof. Marcella Bertuccelli, who has always encouraged the writing of this book.

I am also greatly indebted to Prof. John Morley for his careful reading and for his insightful suggestions.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the many people who saw me through this book, especially my family and my friend and colleague Dr. Gloria Cappelli for their love and moral support.

# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

## (1) Syntactic Glosses

Aux	Auxiliary verb
CPT	Constant Polarity Tag
IT	Invariant Tag
Ø	Ellipsis
QT	Question Tag
RPT	Reversed Polarity Tag
Subj	Subject
TQ	Tag Question
V	Verb

## (2) Films

AB	<i>About a Boy</i>
C	<i>Casomai</i>
FM	<i>The Full Monty</i>
O	<i>Ovosodo</i>
SD	<i>Sliding Doors</i>
SL	<i>Secrets &amp; Lies</i>
SM	<i>Santa Maradona</i>
UB	<i>L'Ultimo Bacio</i>



# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Introductory Remarks and Aims

When we talk we normally make a specific use of language on the basis of the various purposes of interaction. Everyday conversation is an immediate spontaneous process “done on the flow” (Chafe, Danielewicz 1987: 88) where speakers—more or less intentionally—show their abilities in using language to communicate and convey information. Speaking is basically interactional, in that its principal aim is “to express personal feelings, to establish, reaffirm or maintain interpersonal relationships” (Biber 1988: 42). To this purpose, several factors intervene to build up a communicative situation. Prosodic features such as intonation, stress, rhythm and pausing, together with paralanguage—i.e. facial expression, eye-contact, gesture, physical contact—contribute to the utterance meaning, enriching the talk-exchange. In fact, when analysing communication dynamics, it is fundamental to take into account not only *what* is said but also *how* it is said. As a consequence, linguistic strategies in oral communication are worth studying in order to understand the mechanisms that govern communication in a language system. The focus of this study is on English tags, including both question tags and invariant tags, a linguistic phenomenon pertaining strictly to orality, where a combination of such factors is in play, and one that is distinctive of the English language.

Question tags *stricto sensu* in particular, that is inflectional tags, are an extremely complex type of conversational routine, basically because their use is syntactically-bound and the interpretation of their meaning/function is the result of the combination of their formal properties with the intonational contour in a given situational context. Besides, the fact that tags are often multifunctional, as they perform more than one function at a time, even though the most prominent can be singled out from secondary functions, confirms the idea of their complex nature.

Admittedly, the literature on English tags is quite wide and varied, yet this linguistic phenomenon has never been studied thoroughly, since

generally the several works on the topic tend not to pay enough attention to the intonational contour, by describing it imprecisely—or taking it for granted—but it is in fact a crucial element in the interpretation of their meaning/function. Moreover, the study of tags in a corpus<sup>1</sup> of transcribed real spontaneous conversation would be quite limited, because of the impossibility of providing information on the previously mentioned aspects, namely paralanguage and prosody, which are fundamental in a conversational exchange in general and for the interpretation of tags in particular, without mentioning the fact that it would inevitably leave out the visual elements anyway. This is the reason why in the present study tags are analysed in a specific text-type, namely the feature film, which is a complex semiotic text that provides a more complete set of parameters, both visual and auditory, for analysis. Even though film language is a fictional spoken variety, it nonetheless attempts to portray everyday conversation, in order to draw the audiences into the film's narrative (Pavesi 2005), and is highly dependent on spontaneous discourse. Therefore, the main aim is to analyse English tags both quantitatively and qualitatively on the syntactic, pragmatic and prosodic level in film language in the first place, by exploiting the additional information provided by the visual and auditory codes in films in order to get a more precise interpretation of their communicative functions. Then, despite the artificial nature of film dialogue, it nonetheless seems to display similarities with real dialogue (Kozloff 2000); so, a secondary aim is to attempt to determine the degree of its naturalness/artificiality as regards the use of tags through qualitative and quantitative in-depth investigation. To this end, an analysis of data from a corpus of spontaneous conversation in English will be carried out, particularly focusing on the types of tags employed.

This work, however, also intends to investigate English tags from a translational perspective. More specifically, dealing primarily with films, tags are studied in a specific type of audiovisual translation, namely Italian dubbing, firstly in order to check how and to what extent they are transposed in a different language like Italian, which does not have so structured a set of equivalent expressions like tags, and secondly, to see

---

<sup>1</sup> Conversely, a few examples of corpora of spontaneous conversation that are annotated both prosodically and pragmatically are the PPD corpus—i.e. Corpus of Prosodic, Pragmatic and Discourse Features—which is based on the spoken component of the ICE-Ireland (Kallen, Kirk 2007, 2008), which thus focuses on a particular variety of English, that is Irish English, and where tags are indicated with the symbol “@”; and the London/Lund Corpus (Svartvik 1990), which dates back to 1990s and mainly focuses on academic speech.



how much space they are granted in translation, because of the general difficulty in rendering aspects of orality and the tendency to deletion that has been observed for neighbouring phenomena (see, for example, Bonsignori, Bruti, Masi 2011 and 2012 on greetings and leave-takings in dubbing), especially in a “constrained” translation like dubbing, which is severely influenced by the visual dimension.

Finally, to be consistent and in line with the analysis of tags in English, the use of the various translating options employed in the Italian dub will be studied also in original Italian film language and in spontaneous speech, in order to ascertain to what extent they are used in all these different genres.

In summary, the present work centres on the syntactic and prosodic properties of English tags, which are studied in context from an integrated pragmatic and translational perspective, but also qualifies as a contrastive study in that the use of these conversational routines is analysed in two different languages (English and Italian), as well as in different genres and varieties (i.e. film language, dubbese and spontaneous speech).

## 1.2. Some Methodological Considerations

As mentioned in the previous section, the present work intends to study English tags in feature films as a starting point. To this purpose, it was necessary to transcribe the entire original soundtracks of the films under investigation, in order to analyse tags properly in context and also to acknowledge the frequency of occurrence in the whole “text”. Therefore, manual transcription was necessary for the sake of precision and also because relying on film transcripts that are widely available on the web has proven to be an unsafe choice, since they dramatically differ from what is actually uttered in films (Forchini 2012). Moreover, as regards screenplays or scripts, which refer to the texts written for the shooting of films including detailed information on stage directions, scenes and dialogues, Remael (2008) states that “in the world of cinema, it goes without saying that the screenplay is not the film, that it can be rewritten at any time during production, and that it almost invariably is” (2008: 58). She concludes by saying that “[i]n a way, this means that ‘the’ screenplay of a film, in the sense of the one and only text on which the film is based, does not exist” (2008: 58). These are the reasons that strongly motivated manual transcription.

Transcription is described as a subjective “interpretative act” (Lapadat, Lindsay 1999) which depends on the purpose of the study at which it is aimed. In this sense, the transcriber is also an interpreter of the

communicative situations to be represented, so that he/she has to select the information that deserves attention, maintaining a balance between readability and accuracy (Tilley 2003). However, given the paramount importance of transcription in the present work, it is nonetheless worth keeping in mind the ancillary status of transcription as a starting point for the identification and concrete visualisation of the phenomena object of the analysis, whereas, most importantly, it is fundamental to actually watch and listen to interactional exchanges (Pallotti 1999). More specifically, in the case of English tags, and especially of question tags *stricto sensu*, since the principal aim is to analyse them thoroughly and study their meaning/function not only on the basis of their formal properties, but also integrating the syntactic with the prosodic analysis, always taking into account the situational context, an instrumental analysis of the acoustic files containing tagged utterances was carried out. With the help of the *PRAAT* software and the use of spectrograms, their intonational contour was analysed in detail, so that it was possible to actually “visualise” their prosody, thus backing up the results with material evidence and propping up the analyst’s task with some objective observations.

Finally, one last note on transcription. In this respect, Remael (2008) distinguishes scripts or screenplays from “dialogue lists” (2008: 57), which consist in the transcription of the actual dialogues heard in the original version of a film and which, thus, are meant for audiovisual translators. Since audiovisual translation is a topic of ever-increasing interest in Italian research (see, for instance, Perego, Taylor 2012), English tags are here analysed also in Italian dubbing and, therefore, the transcription of translated dialogues in the dubbed version of the films under investigation was carried out as well.

### 1.3. The Data

The data for the present study are drawn from different sources. The first and central source is a hand-compiled film corpus, which consists of the transcription of the dialogue lists of the films chosen for the study of tags. More specifically, the film corpus under investigation can be subdivided into two subcomponents that share some basic features which can then be compared. The first is the English subcomponent, which consists of four films of British production released between 1997 and 2002 and set in the present, where much space is devoted to everyday conversation, since in all of them the plot basically revolves around personal relations. Moreover, even though British English is the main

spoken variety, language varies diatopically, according to the geographical provenance of the characters, as well as diastratically, on the basis of their social class. Linguistic variation offers a wider scenario for the possible usage of tags, thus enriching the study of this topic and allowing for comparison between the different meanings and functions on the basis of such varied factors. Moreover, the English subcomponent is actually a parallel corpus, which comprises the original soundtrack of the films in English and the corresponding Italian dubbed version. In the same way, the second subcomponent is the Italian film corpus, which consists of four films of Italian production released approximately in the same period and sharing the same basic features as to the genre, time setting and linguistic variation.

The second set of data is collected from two online corpora of spontaneous conversation in English and Italian. In the first case, a corpus of British English was chosen to be consistent with the analysis of tags carried out in the English film corpus, where the main variety is in fact British English. Therefore, the demographic part of the spoken component of the *BNCweb* seemed to be the best option to this end. It consists in the transcription of recorded spontaneous face-to-face conversations by a number of selected speakers in the United Kingdom, and thus intends to be representative of everyday spoken language in English (cf. 4.7. for detailed information). For the Italian counterpart, the study of conversational routines that roughly correspond to English tags was carried out using data retrieved from BADIP, a free database that hosts the online version of the LIP Corpus, which is the most famous and widely used resource for the study of spoken Italian (cf. 5.7. for further detailed information).

## 1.4. Outline of the Book

This book has the following layout. Chapter 2 is devoted to the description of English tags—i.e. including both question tags *stricto sensu* and invariant tags—on the basis of their formal and syntactic properties, with a critical overview of the relevant literature and taking into account the varieties of English, especially certain dialects in the UK, and the different constructions to which a tag can be appended, namely imperative, exhortative and elliptical sentences. The analysis of the phenomenon is also tackled in chapter 3, with a general overview of the main communicative and pragmatic functions performed by tags, as the result of a critical analysis of the various categories identified mostly relying on Holmes (1982, 1995) and Algeo (1988, 1990, 2006), the main reference models in this work.

The next part of the present study is more hands-on. In chapter 4, apart from the introductory sections providing methodological information on data collection, the analytic framework and some prosodic notions, tags are analysed from different viewpoints—syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and prosodic—in their practical usage in the specific genre of film language, which is defined in relation to the opposition between speech and writing. Data are collected from a corpus of four English films and analysed considering first the impact they have on the different linguistic levels individually and then the overall meaning of a tagged utterance. More specifically, the syntactic analysis of tags carried out in each film separately, in order to determine the most recurrent types, is then followed by the analysis of this linguistic phenomenon in an integrated prosodic and pragmatic approach, where the use of spectrograms helps the researcher to establish the exact intonational pattern of tags and therefore proves to be a surplus value to get a more precise interpretation of their communicative functions in a particular situational context. This chapter ends with the analysis of tags in a corpus of English spontaneous conversation—i.e. the *BNCweb*—and then the results are compared with those in English film dialogue. The next step in the analysis is developed in chapter 5, where tags are investigated in translation, and more specifically, in the dubbed Italian version of the four English films analysed in the first place. Then, the use of the various translating options in Italian dubbing is compared with Italian original film language, using data from a comparable corpus of four Italian films, and with a corpus of spontaneous Italian conversation—i.e. *BADIP*. At the end of chapter 5, some conclusions are drawn on the use of English tags and their Italian equivalents by means of comparison between original film language, dubbing and spontaneous speech. The last chapter, chapter 6, is devoted to final conclusions and suggestions for further studies.

## CHAPTER TWO

# A SYNTACTIC DESCRIPTION OF ENGLISH QUESTION TAGS AND INVARIANT TAGS

### 2.1. Introduction

The English language displays a complex system of tags, which can be divided into two groups: question tags *stricto sensu*—henceforth also QTs—and invariant tags. The difference between these two types is mainly syntactic, in the sense that the former are created according to certain syntactic features that characterise the main sentence to which the tag is appended and comply with the polarity requisite—i.e. QTs in the strict sense are inflectional—while invariant forms are completely independent from the main sentence. The complex system of tags is a distinctive feature of the English language, in opposition to the majority of European languages, which tend to have only invariant and non-inflectional structures—e.g. Italian *no?*, *vero?*, French *n'est-ce pas?*, German *nicht wahr?*, Portuguese *não è?*, Spanish *verdad?*.

In the following paragraphs, the literature on QTs will be critically reviewed, taking into consideration the various approaches applied to study this topic on the basis of the different linguistic perspectives of analysis. Moreover, this chapter mainly focuses on the syntactic description of the various types of tags, including invariant tags, in an attempt to build up a classification. A definition of each syntactic type contained in the main varieties of English is provided, together with the description of the corresponding main features. To this purpose, examples are mainly taken from films, TV series<sup>1</sup> and soap operas<sup>2</sup>, in line with the

---

<sup>1</sup> For the American TV series *Friends*, scripts from the website <http://www.friendscafe.org/scripts/> were used.

<sup>2</sup> For the British soap opera *Eastenders*, scripts from the website of the “Television Transcript Project”, namely <http://www.oocities.org/tvtranscripts/index.htm> were used, while for the Australian soap opera *Home and Away*, scripts were taken from the website <http://www.backtothebay.net/episodes/scripts/index.php>. Interestingly, in the first case, linguistic information about the meaning of certain idioms and

present type of study, which attempts to analyse the use of tags in audiovisual texts, and in order to describe the various instances taking into account linguistic varieties, so as to have a wider range of cases to examine. Attention will be devoted to pragmatic and functional perspectives in chapter 4.

## 2.2. A General Overview on the Literature on Question Tags

Question tags in English have received different treatments according to the linguistic perspective of analysis, ranging from syntax to semantics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics and prosody. However, despite the quite abundant body of literature with several articles published in various journals of linguistics and papers presented at conferences, which mainly focus on very specific aspects or uses of tag questions<sup>3</sup> (also TQs), and even a few monographs<sup>4</sup> devoted strictly to this subject, the phenomenon has never been wholly satisfactorily studied. In the present section, the main purpose is to describe the various approaches to this topic on the basis of the different linguistic levels of analysis, taking into consideration some of the previously mentioned studies as a point of departure. Four main ‘blocks’ of studies have been identified on this basis, even though the various perspectives very frequently overlap.

First of all, an important role is played by *Grammatical Studies*, which have focused on the syntax and semantics of TQs. A distinction should be made within syntactic studies between *descriptive* studies on the one hand, and *Transformational-Generative* studies on the other. The first type includes Bolinger (1957), Sinclair (1972), Hudson (1975), Hintikka (1982), Quirk *et al.* (1985), Biber *et al.* (1999) and mainly consists of a description of the structural patterns of TQs, which are also intimately related to their semantics, dealing with the notions of truth value, presupposition and the interrelationship of the tag with the preceding statement. These studies are very useful to build up the different categories of tags that might be used in a classification, even if they do not present a complete range of cases. In the other branch of grammatical studies, TQs have been the subject of a

---

slang expressions—since the story is set in East-London, where Cockney is predominantly spoken—is given, and even some words are transcribed mirroring Cockney pronunciation.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Winefield, Chandler, McLain Allen (1989) on tag questions in psychotherapy and Blackwell (2001) on tag questions in the courtroom.

<sup>4</sup> See Armagost (1972), Nässlin (1984) and Axelsson (2011).

thorough investigation in earlier transformational-generative grammar. The most important works within this framework are by Klima (1965), Arbini (1969), Huddleston (1970), Cattell (1973) and Akmajian and Heny (1975), which basically represent an attempt to derive the structure of the tag from the main clause, but only consider the case of “opposite polarity TQs”—i.e. the tag is negative if the main clause is positive and *vice versa*—polarity reversal being the fundamental requisite and condition for the well-formedness of the TQ. The observable difficulties in trying to find out a rule for the construction of TQs and the scanty interest of generative linguistics in *peripheral* rather than in *core* phenomena have contributed to the fact that this topic has been ignored for about twenty years, since the 1990s when a new attempt to deal with TQs can be registered in the works by Bennet (1989), Culicover (1992) and Bender and Flickinger (1999). Bender and Flickinger in particular point out the importance of studying peripheral constructions because they “will illuminate basic aspects of grammar which are underdetermined by the well-studied, core phenomena” (1999: 213).

The second important block of studies is based on a functional and pragmatic approach, describing the various functions and uses of TQs in discourse, and includes Hudson (1975), whose main point of interest is the notion of conduciveness of TQs; Aijmer (1979), Millar and Brown (1979), Holmes (1982), Algeo (1988), McGregor (1995), Andersen (2001), and Kimps (2007), who try to describe the different functions of TQs in conversation, though using different labels; Stenström (1997) and Stenström *et al.* (2002), who mainly focus on the functions of *invariant tags*; Sadock and Zwicky (1985) and Houck (1991), who study the illocutionary force of utterances with QTs, as well as Kimps and Davidse (2008), who limit their study to the case of imperative constant polarity tags. To sum up, TQs are studied considering their functional properties and pragmatic meaning, showing how instrumental they are to expressing politeness—an interesting claim against this assertion is made by Algeo (1990) and confirmed by the use of tags as a means for aggravating language in the courtroom (Biscetti 2006)—and how they can contribute to turn-taking and discourse coherence, also functioning as *discourse* or *pragmatic markers* in spontaneous conversation (Andersen 2001).

The third block of studies is strictly related to the investigation of functions of TQs and it is conducted from the point of view of *sociolinguistic variation*. In this concern, analyses done within the frame of sociolinguistics strictly speaking, but also of *Gender studies* and *Dialect studies*, will be taken into account. The first are very important in the treatment of TQs because they have given rise to a long debate that started

with the publication of an article by Lakoff in 1972, where she claimed that women were the primary users of TQs because of their role in society, and for this reason the use of this linguistic device mirrored their insecurity or lack of commitment. This claim caused an immediate response and gave rise to the first empirical study conducted by Dubois and Crouch (1975), who tested Lakoff's hypothesis and showed opposite results. The debate has gone on with subsequent studies<sup>5</sup> focusing on the complexity of the functions of tags and their relation to gender construction (Holmes 1982; Cameron *et al.* 1989; Tannen 1990). However, Lakoff's contribution remains fundamental, even if it states a partial truth, because it paved the way to a new approach to TQs by underlining their social value in communication. Other relevant works within sociolinguistics are Stenström (1997), Andersen (2001) and Stenström *et al.* (2002), who study the use of question tags and invariant tags in London teenage speakers, as well as the more recent work carried out by Moore and Podesva (2009) which focuses on the social meaning and use of TQs by a community of high school girls in northwest England to represent group identity. These studies are strictly associated with others that analyse various dialects and varieties of English, that is Millar and Brown (1979) on Edinburgh speech; Cheshire (1981) on English spoken in Reading; Rottet and Sprouse (2008) on Welsh; Christian (1983) on varieties influenced by Spanish; Algeo (1988, 2006), Tottie and Hoffmann (2006) and Allerton (2009), who compare the use of TQs in British and American English; Norrick (1995); Meyerhoff (1994) on New Zealand English; McGregor (1995) on Australian English; Borlongan (2008) on Philippine English, Wong (2007) on Hong Kong English, and Avis (1972) and Gold (2005, 2008) on Canadian English. All these works deal with both QTs in the strict sense and invariant tags, showing a considerable regional variation in the use of the different forms, on both phonetic and functional grounds.

The last block of studies on this topic relates to the intonation of QTs, which is a fundamental parameter to consider for the interpretation of utterances with tags. Some important contributions are O'Connor (1955), Pope (1976), Bald (1979), Rando (1980), Siertsema (1980) and Ladd (1981), who generally attempt to present a detailed survey of the prosodic features of QTs and investigate the functions associated with them.

Finally, a few words to briefly trace a diachronic sketch of the development of tags, despite the scarcity of material available for such an

---

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, McMillan *et al.* (1977), Lapadat, Seesahai (1977) and Fishman (1980).





In the present work, for practical reasons, the term *tag* will be used to refer to the question proper, while TQ will be used to refer to the whole structure.

The general principles that govern the formation of TQs are well described by Quirk *et al.* (1985: 810) and can be summed up as follows:

- *Rule 1*: the question tag consists in an *operator* followed by a *subject*;
- *Rule 2*: the *operator* of the question tag is the same as the one present in the preceding statement; but if the main clause has no operator, the dummy operator *do* is used in the tag;
- *Rule 3*: the *subject* of the tag must be a pronoun which repeats or co-refers with the subject in the main clause, and it agrees with it in number, person and gender;
- *Rule 4*: as regards *polarity*, if the main clause is positive, the tag is negative and *vice versa*;
- *Rule 5*: the *nuclear tone* of the tag may be rising or falling, and it occurs always on the operator<sup>6</sup>.

As a result, two types of TQs can be produced:

1. James likes his job, *doesn't he?* → Positive / Negative
2. James doesn't like his job, *does he?* → Negative / Positive

Actually, Quirk (1985: 811) states that on the basis of these rules four types of TQs are possible, since he considers also the case when each of the instances above has a rising or a falling tone on the tag, changing completely its meaning and function. However, the focus is here strictly on the syntactic features of TQs, leaving the treatment of intonation patterns to the next section, which deals with the meaning and the pragmatics of TQs.

Examples (1) and (2) above are generally called “reversed polarity tags” (also RPTs) (Huddleston 1970; Hudson 1975; Aijmer 1979: 10)–but other different labels are also used, such as “inverted tags” (Hintikka 1982) and “contrasting tags” (Cattell 1972: 615)– and belong to the first category in the present classification. This first type of tag is characterised by the inversion of polarity between the main sentence and the tag, which is a condition of grammatical well-formedness in generative-transformational studies (Akmajian, Heny 1975: 203); in this sense, some scholars name these tags “regular tags” (Stenström 1997: 140) and

---

<sup>6</sup> The position of the nuclear tone is discussed more thoroughly in the chapter on the prosodic features of QTs (cf. 4.5.1.; 4.5.2.).

“canonical tags” (Holmes 1982). The fact that if the main sentence is positive, the tag takes opposite polarity, as far as negation is concerned, obeys what Lakoff calls the rule of “negative transportation” (Lakoff 1969:140), for which she provides not only semantic but also syntactic reasons taking the formation of tag questions as an example.

An important contribution to the analysis of reversed polarity tags is by Klima (1965), who is also the pioneer in the study of tags within generative grammar. His theory, which states that the tag derives from an underlying simple sentence, influenced subsequent works within the same frame until the end of the 1970s (Malone 1978: 57). Indeed, Klima claims that “the source of the tag is the same as that of the simple yes-no question” (1965: 264). Moreover, he affirms that the form of the tag strictly depends on the form of the main sentence, as regards the items that mark polarity; but this syntactic dependence is firmly opposed by Culicover (1992), who supports his own claim with a counterexample:

3. She rarely / hardly ever calls, *does she*

With this example, Culicover shows that the positive tag is selected not by a syntactically negated main sentence but by a main sentence that contains an adverbial item with negative force, demonstrating the non-syntactic nature of the dependency between tag and main sentence (1992: 196).

Reversed polarity tags are of two types, as can be seen from examples (1) and (2): in (1) the main clause—or “host clause” (Cattell 1972: 614)—is positive, so the tag is negative; while in (2) the main clause is negative and the tag positive. See some other examples for each type respectively below:

Positive / Negative:

4. Daniel: **It’s** very quiet here, *isn’t it?* Are we the only guests, or... (*Bridget Jones’s Diary*)
5. Ian: Yeah, they’re no problem. Hey, listen, I’ve been thinking about me Mum. Perhaps we should invite her around for a supper. I mean, **you could** knock us something up, *couldn’t ya?* (*Eastenders 2*)
6. Josh: Aw, **it looked** good for a moment, *didn’t it?* (*Home and Away 4*)

## Negative / Positive:

7. Nigel: [pause] Well, I mean, **it's not**--not--surprising, **is it**--you had a shock. I mean, **you didn't** know what you were sayin', **did ya.** You didn't mean what you said. [deals quietly with his anxieties about Grant] (*Eastenders 1*)
8. Spike: Even he. Hey, **you couldn't** help me with an incredibly important decision, **could you?** (*Notting Hill*)
9. Ross: Thanks Aunt Pheebs. Hey, **you didn't** microwave that, **did you**, because it's breast milk, and you're not supposed to do that. (*Friends 2/2*)

The choice between the two forms has pragmatic reasons which will be investigated further on. However, it is interesting to point out that, in their study, Tottie and Hoffmann (2006) analyse the difference in the use of tags between British and American English. Concerning the case of reversed polarity tags, they conclude that, despite the fact that positive-negative polarity tags are indeed the most frequent choice in both varieties, American English displays a greater use of negative-positive tags – i.e. 27% in AmE *versus* 17% in BrE–(2006: 289). However, a distinction regarding the formation of reversed polarity tags in Edinburgh Scots needs to be made. In fact, nothing relevant has to be said with reference to affirmative tags, except that the morpho-syntax of verb forms in Edinburgh speech is different from Standard English. More specifically, the formation of a negative main sentence preceding the affirmative tag deserves attention. In Scots, the verb can be negated either by the independent word *not* or the particle *-n't* cliticised onto the operator, like in Standard English, but also using the isolate negator *no* or the clitic negator *-nae* (Miller 1993: 114; Anderwald 2002: 54), as in the following examples taken from Millar and Brown (1979: 27):

- 10a. He's **no** going, **is he?**  
 b. She **canna**e cook, **can she?**  
 c. He **willna**e come, **will he?**  
 d. You **dinna**e want to go, **do you?**

On the other hand, the clitic negator *-nae* behaves differently from the clitic *-n't* in Standard English, since it “cannot undergo subject-operator inversion” (1979: 29). Therefore, when the tag is negative, there are two possible forms to construct negative interrogatives in Scots: a) like in Standard English, with the particle *-n't* cliticised onto the operator; or b) using an “isolated negative *no*” (1979: 28) following the copied subject, as in:

- 11a. She can cook, *can she no?*  
 b. He will come, *will he no?*  
 c. You wanted to go, *did you no?*

This second option is very common in colloquial Edinburgh Scots, and it differs in intonation from the standard form in English, since in this case the tonic syllable that takes the tonic contour is not the auxiliary but the isolated negative *no*. Similarly, in formal Standard English, the negative tonic particle can be placed after the pronoun—i.e. *did he **not**?*—(Quirk *et al.* 1985: 810).

### 2.3.1.1. The Case of *Aren't I*?

Irregularities in negation are quite frequent in English syntax, as is shown by the case of negative tags with the first person singular pronoun *I* and *be* as the operator:

12. Dave: Look, I'll help, all right? **I'm** running, ***aren't I**?* (*The Full Monty*)

*Aren't I* is generally defined as “the ordinary default negative present tense” (Hudson 2000: 308), since there is no “natural informal contraction of *am I not*” (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 129). However, this claim is contrasted by Hudson (2000) who states that actually in some dialects other than Standard British English the inverted form is not *aren't I*, but *amn't I*, as in Scots—generally used by educated people (Miller 1993: 114; Miller 2004: 51)—and Irish English, used only in the interrogative form (Quirk *et al.* 1985; Harris 1993: 158; Bresnan 2001: 19; Filppula 2004: 81).

### 2.3.1.2. The Case of *Ain't*

Another widespread feature of English dialects is the use of *ain't*<sup>7</sup> to negate *be*—both as a copula and auxiliary—and *have* with any subject. This nonstandard contraction undergoes a levelling process which avoids the subject-verb agreement (Hudson 2000) and it is somewhat more current in American English rather than in British English (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 129), even if it is becoming more and more common in British English too (Algeo 2006: 21). Actually, *ain't* does not occur in Irish or Scottish English, but it is part of the traditional dialect system of the Southeast of

---

<sup>7</sup> Concerning the derivation of *ain't*, Jespersen (1940) suggests that it could have derived both from *hasn't/haven't* and *aren't/isn't* independently. Besides, also *am not* could represent another probable ancestor of *ain't*.

England (Anderwald 2004: 186). As a matter of fact, the use and occurrence of such a linguistic device has been treated by Cheshire (1981) with reference to a specific area in England, namely the town of Reading–West of London–where *ain't* is frequently used in the formation of question tags, as in examples in (13):

13a. **I'm** going out with my bird now, *ain't I?*

b. Ricky: We'll all spend it together, then **everyone's** happy, *ain't they?*  
(*Eastenders* 4)

c. Phil: Don't be daft; **we gotta** talk about it, *ain't we?* This small talk's been driving me mad. (*Eastenders* 2)

Moreover, as we can see from example (13b), the indefinite pronoun subject *everyone* in the main sentence takes *they* in the tag, apparently violating the agreement requisite, in generativist terms. Actually, this relation is said to be regular by Quirk *et al.* (1985: 342) and can be attested since Shakespearian times<sup>8</sup>. In fact, Bender and Flickinger (1999) explain that there are two lexemes *they*: one which identifies its (syntactic) AGR and (semantic) INDEX values; the other which keeps the two values distinct, supporting the choice of the more semantic INDEX feature in the formation of the tag (1999: 212).

Actually, in nowadays spoken English reversed polarity tags are not the unique forms of tags, in fact there are other types that can be included among the “anomalous” types, which will be reviewed in the next part.

### 2.3.2. The ‘Anomalous’ Type: Constant Polarity Tags

From the previous syntactic description of tags, a certain degree of complexity has emerged; in fact the formation of tags often undergoes various exceptions while speaking. One of the parameter that may not be regularly observed is the inversion of polarity between main sentence and tag, giving rise to the so called *constant polarity tags* (also CPTs), where an affirmative tag follows an affirmative statement, as in the examples below:

---

<sup>8</sup> See an example in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, Act 3, Scene 4:  
Margaret: Nothing I; but God send every one *their* heart's desire!