

DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES

Tag questions in fiction dialogue

KARIN AXELSSON



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

Doctoral dissertation in English linguistics,
to be publicly defended,
by due permission of the Faculty of Arts
at the University of Gothenburg,
on May 13, 2011, at 1 p.m.,
in Lilla Hörsalen, Humanisten,
Renströmsgatan 6, Gothenburg.

Abstract

Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, 2011

Title: Tag questions in fiction dialogue

Author: Karin Axelsson

Language: English

Department: Department of Languages and Literatures, Box 200, SE-405 30 Göteborg

ISBN: 978-91-628-8302-7

Electronic version: <http://hdl.handle.net/2077/24047>

This study investigates the use of tag questions (TQs) in British English fiction dialogue by making comparisons to spoken conversation. Data has been retrieved from two subcorpora of the *British National Corpus* (BNC): a Fiction Subcorpus and the demographic part of the spoken component. More than 2,500 TQs have been analysed for their formal features and more than 600 TQs also for their pragmatic functions.

The results show that declarative tag questions (DecTQs) are underrepresented in fiction dialogue, whereas imperative tag questions (ImpTQs) are overrepresented. Moreover, several differences between the formal features and pragmatic functions of TQs in fiction dialogue and spoken conversation have been reported.

In fiction, reporting clauses and comments in the narrative provide the reader with information the author believes the reader needs to interpret the dialogue in the way the author has intended; hence, fiction dialogue is enriched with information which is useful in the analysis of a linguistic phenomenon such as the TQ.

For the functional analysis of TQs, a hierarchical model has been developed and applied. Most DecTQs turn out to be used rhetorically; only a minority are response-eliciting and, in fiction dialogue, a small number also exchange goods and services. The functional patterns for DecTQs are quite different in the two subcorpora. Most rhetorical DecTQs are addressee-oriented in fiction dialogue, but speaker-centred in spoken conversation. Among the response-eliciting DecTQs, there are similar proportions of confirmation-seeking DecTQs, but, in fiction dialogue, there are proportionately more confirmation-demanding DecTQs, and also a few conversation-initiating DecTQs. All ImpTQs exchange goods and services; in fiction dialogue, there is a higher proportion of ImpTQs used as commands, and a lower proportion of ImpTQs providing advice.

The distinctive functional patterns for TQs in fiction dialogue seem largely due to the depiction of problems, conflicts and confrontations and an avoidance of conversations on trivial matters. In fiction dialogue, authors utilize the full potential of DecTQs, which results in large formal and functional variation, whereas they tend to prefer the most conventional form of ImpTQs. Differences between the functional patterns of TQs in fiction dialogue and spoken conversation may partly explain the differences in frequencies and formal features.

Keywords: tag questions, fiction dialogue, direct speech, spoken conversation, pragmatics, corpus-based study, BNC, British English