

Biased question vs. tag question: Equally acceptable?

Background: Research suggests a close relationship between matrix biased questions (BQs) like (1) and tag questions (TQs) like (2), where (2) is simply a VP-elided version of (1) (Krifka 2015, Ladd 1981, Malamud & Stephenson 2014, Reese 2007, Sailor 2011, van Rooij & Šafářová 2003).

1. Isn't Sarah coming? 2. Sarah's coming, isn't she?

Both constructions are permitted in contexts where the speaker has a prior belief *p*, which is either being challenged by some counterevidence (a negative evidential context) or not (a neutral evidential context) (Ladd 1981, Sudo 2013). I present the results of an experiment testing whether speakers prefer to produce BQs or TQs in these situations where both are available. If, as suggested, TQs are semantically equivalent to BQs, there is little reason to expect any preferences.

Methodology: I designed a forced choice experiment using Qualtrics. 113 participants were presented with short contexts establishing a) a situation; b) a belief *p*; c) whether the evidential context was negative or neutral. Participants were then asked to select a response to the scenario – either a BQ or a TQ (see 3 and 4 below). There were 10 examples of each evidential context (20 test items) with 30 filler cases. All TQs were 'canonical' TQs (an auxiliary verb with *-n't* and a subject e.g. *isn't it*); all BQs used *-n't* negation, following Domaneschi et al. (2017). Prosody was not indicated in either case, and so participants could interpret the intonation as they wished.

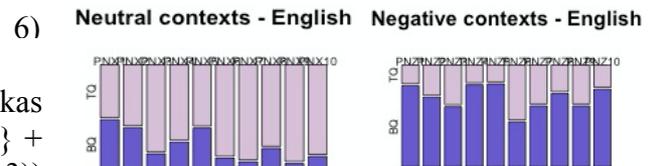
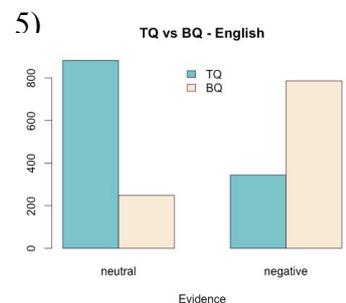
<p>3) NEUTRAL EVIDENTIAL CONTEXT: You want to go and see the new Harry Potter film. You're pretty sure I saw it last week. You want to know what I thought of it, so you say:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Haven't you seen it? • You've seen it, haven't you? 	<p>4) NEGATIVE EVIDENTIAL CONTEXT: You think I won the marathon at the weekend. However, I start telling you that I am disappointed with my performance. You say:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Didn't you win the race? • You won the race, didn't you?
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Results: There was a strong preference for BQs in the *negative* evidential context ($\chi^2 = 172.89$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), and a strong preference for TQs in the *neutral* evidential context ($\chi^2 = 355.71$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). There were no effects of age, gender or location.

Analysis: I suggest that as intonation was not indicated, speakers preferentially interpreted the TQs with falling intonation contours (the most common contour in English TQs (Dehé & Braun 2013)). Gunlogson (2008) argues that *rising* intonation contributes the notion of *contingency* to an utterance. When an utterance is *contingent*, its acceptance to the Common Ground is dependent on the following discourse move.

I suggest, therefore, that English nuclear TQs Table (Farkas & Bruce 2010) firstly *p* (in the anchor); secondly, $\{p, \neg p\} + \{\text{FALSUM}, \neg\text{FALSUM}\}$ (a BQ, following Romero (2013))

in the tag – however, lack of rising intonation means that acceptance of *p* to CG is not contingent on the addressee's response to the TQ. As long as they do not actively *reject p*, *p* will be accepted. Indeed, speakers can take full responsibility for the truth of *p* in the event that the addressee does not know the answer to a TQ (7). This is not the case with BQs (8); if the addressee does not know the answer, the most a speaker can say is that they *think p* is true. This makes a TQ a more relevant move than BQs in contexts where there is no counterevidence challenging the speaker's belief.



<p>7) S: There's a bar there, isn't there? A: I don't know. S: Well, there is. / I think there is.</p>	<p>8) S: Isn't there a bar there? A: I don't know. S: #Well, there is. / I think there is.</p>
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Final note: Evidence from the variation in results of the individual examples tested (6) suggests that this is a gradient phenomenon, and that the perceived strength of the (counter)evidence affects the proportional likelihood of TQ/BQ choice, rather than there being any sort of stipulation that e.g. neutral evidential contexts *always* license TQs (as Northrup's (2014) model would have it).