

## **Ja hear that didja?: Interrogative Tags in Australian English**

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### **1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

According to standard grammars of English such as Quirk et al 1985:810-813 and Huddleston 1984:375-376, tag questions can be appended to declarative, imperative and exclamative clauses. No mention is made of the possibility of attaching a tag to an interrogative clause, suggesting that these writers consider such combinations do not occur, and presumably regard them as ungrammatical. This opinion has been explicitly stated by Butler 1985:216 and Akmajian and Heny 1975:205, among others. In Australian English, however, tag questions may be, and not infrequently are, appended to polar interrogative clauses, as demonstrated by examples (1) and (2), recorded from everyday conversation:

- (1) *Are you going now are you?*
- (2) *Is the tap water down here that bad is it?*

The only reference to this type of tag construction in Australian English which I am aware of is a brief mention in Cattell 1973:616 (although Bolinger 1957 provides some examples from American English). Cattell mentions only tags to ordinary positive polar interrogatives such as (1) and (2). In fact, however, tag questions may also — in Australian English — be attached to various other syntactic constructions which, it will be suggested, can be regarded as showing interrogative mood. These include clauses which lack an operator (first auxiliary), as in (3), and polar interrogative constructions with an initial WH word, invariably *what*, as in (4).

- (3) *They want to look at other things did they?*
- (4) *What did you see him just then did you?*

The term *interrogative tag* is used in this paper to refer to constructions such as (1)-(4): to the collocation of a tag question consisting of a pronoun

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper presented at the Australian Linguistic Society Conference in Sydney 1992. I am grateful to the audience at that presentation for their comments, and to Ray Cattell, Jean Mulder, Alan Rumsey and an anonymous referee for many useful comments on an earlier draft. The usual disclaimers apply. Last, but not least, I thank my family and friends for providing the examples on which this paper is based.

subject and an auxiliary, with a stem (the item which is tagged) in interrogative mood. If reference needs to be made specifically to the tag alone, this will be by means of either of the terms tag or tag question.

The main aims of this paper are: (a) to identify and classify the range of interrogative tag types in Australian English; (b) to show that these types are multifunctional, and to distinguish and discuss the main pragmatic functions of each; and (c) to argue that each type of interrogative tag has an inherent core meaning which remains invariant across its many uses. It is contended that interrogative tags are specific types of interrogatives, interrogatives that have been 'modalised' in some way. Their pragmatic functions are comparable with those of ordinary untagged interrogatives. In particular, they are normally used with the unmarked illocutionary force of interrogatives — i.e. to ask questions — although they can also be used in other ways associated with interrogatives. As distinct from ordinary positive interrogatives, however, each type of interrogative tag invokes, as part of its core meaning, some interpretation of an aspect of the context of situation (in the widest sense of the term), enquiring as to the validity of this interpretation. They may thus be classified semantically as interpretative interrogatives. Thus (1) occurred in a context in which there was clear evidence that the addressee was about to go; moreover, it appears to be restricted to contexts such as this. The ordinary positive interrogative clause, by contrast, carries no such interpretative component as a part of its invariant core meaning; if such a meaning is present in a particular utterance, it has been contextually engendered. The positive interrogative *Are you going now?* corresponding to (1) could well be uttered in a context in which there was no evidence at all that the addressee had any intention of going.

The argument is organised as follows. I begin, in section 2, by discussing the corpus and methodological issues. Then in section 3 I identify the various types of interrogative tag and examine their formal syntactic properties. Having done this, I turn, in sections 4-7, to their pragmatic functions, showing that each type is multifunctional. Nevertheless, it is argued that each type shows a single core meaning which remains invariant across all of its uses, and that the pragmatic functions are contextualisations of these core meanings. Section 8 briefly discusses the formal characteristics of interrogative tags in relation to their inherent meanings, and section 9 presents a brief conclusion.

## **2. Methodology and corpus**

Most grammatical investigations of tags employ introspection as their primary methodological tool. Many grammarians study constraints on the relation between the tag and the stem clause by classifying invented examples as either grammatical or ungrammatical; others set about distinguishing possible pragmatic functions of invented examples purely on

the basis of their intuitions as native speakers of English, or by virtue of the formal likeness of tags to interrogatives. Even sociolinguistic and pragmatic studies are prone to the use of introspective methodology: Lakoff's 1975 discussion of differences in use of tags between men and women appears to be based entirely on introspection. The dangers inherent in this methodology are manifest in the following quote from (Lakoff 1975:230): 'Strictly speaking, questioning one's own opinions is futile. Sentences like (10) [my (5) — WMcG] are usually ridiculous.'

(5) \**I have a headache, don't I.*

It is, however, very easy to contextualise (5), showing that it is perfectly acceptable and grammatical. Imagine a situation in which a married couple A and B are cleaning up after a meal, A washing up, B wiping up. A has been clumsily banging the dishes and pans about, and B finally takes A to task over it, saying 'Why are you being so clumsy?'. (5) would clearly be a reasonable response. Note that it invokes no questioning of the speaker's internal state. Rather, it would naturally be A's intention that B interpret it as a criticism of B's lack of perceptiveness in not being aware that A had a headache: B should either know it because (say) A passed a comment to this effect half an hour previously, or should be able to infer it from something that happened previously, etc.<sup>2</sup>

As for the domain investigated in this paper, the problems with introspection are worse. It seems quite ridiculous to question a question, and it is probably for this reason that (as has already been mentioned) many grammarians regard tags to interrogatives as ungrammatical. Furthermore, if one is noticed, it can be regarded as a performance error; but more likely it will simply pass the grammarian by. While being aware of the existence of tags to ordinary polar interrogatives from Cattell 1973 and Bolinger 1957, Hudson 1975 nevertheless excludes them from his study of questions saying (apparently on the basis of introspection) that they do not occur in his dialect. Be this as it may, I have noted at least two instances from the ITV programme *The Bill* — as well as four or five examples of tags to interrogatives lacking operators (like (3)) from that and BBC TV programmes.

Even if one accepts interrogative tags as grammatical, what does introspection tell us about them? Precious little, it seems to me. On becoming consciously aware of them I had for some considerable time not the slightest inkling of their meaning or uses, or indeed of the range of

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<sup>2</sup> It might be objected that I am being unfair on Lakoff since she says only that such utterances are only 'usually ridiculous'. This objection is completely irrelevant: probably most utterances are 'usually ridiculous', and are probably inappropriate in more contexts than they are appropriate. To use — rather than to cite — *I have a headache* in this article would be as ridiculous.

acceptable interrogative tags. Clearly an alternative to introspection was necessary: the investigation had to have an empirical base.<sup>3</sup>

This paper is based primarily on a corpus of interrogative tags I have been amassing since October 1990 from 'naturally occurring' discourse I have overheard. The major source of these examples is utterances addressed to myself, to members of my family, and to colleagues and friends in speech interactions in which I have been involved as an interactive participant. Some examples recorded were produced by myself; however, I have avoided, as far as possible, using such examples in the study, due to the possibility of 'contamination' (which is, however, unlikely, given my lack of intuitions about the constructions). A secondary source was provided by radio and television programmes. I committed the examples to memory, and wrote them down in a notebook as soon as possible afterwards, together with what I considered could be potentially relevant information: details of the social background of the speaker and hearer, and any details of the conversational context which I thought might be relevant (e.g. what the interactants had previously said and what they were doing at the time, etc.). I also recorded, albeit less systematically, examples of other types of tags (mainly declarative) as well as of other grammatical constructions that I overheard which seemed to be relevant to the investigation, including instances of independent usage of unusual constructions found as stems for interrogative tags. Again note was taken of contextual information. I later transferred all this information to computer. The corpus also contains the few examples cited in Bolinger 1957 and Cattell 1973 (which are probably invented), as well as a small number contained in excerpts from transcripts of spoken conversations in Australian English tape recorded by other linguists, and which have appeared in various seminar handouts and publications (invariably without the author's identification of the construction type).

Clearly there are limitations on a corpus of this type. In particular, I had to rely on my (sometimes faulty) memory of the example. Although I trained myself reasonably well to remember the exact wording of examples I heard, I was completely unable to simultaneously process the intonation contours, and commit them to memory. At best I was sometimes able to recall patterns of pausing and/or haituses in the intonation contours. There is also a significant possibility of mishearing. Quite likely I missed many instances of interrogative tags; perhaps on occasion I also misheard ordinary declarative tags as interrogative tags, although I strongly doubt whether there would be very many instances of this type. The greatest area of uncertainty lies in deciding whether or not the stem clause has an

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<sup>3</sup> As has been pointed out by Ray Cattell (pers.comm.), I also make use of introspection at various points in the argument of this paper. However — and this is the crucial point — I do not use introspection as a means of gathering data, or as a means of evaluating the acceptability of sentences.

operator, and it is often impossible to be certain. There are a number of reasons for this. First, initial auxiliaries are frequently phonetically non-salient: in particular, *are*, *am* and *is* may be realised as very weakly articulated [ə] (even, I believe, in some instances, as the glottal stop [ʔ]), [m], and [z], respectively. It is likely that I simply missed these phonetic segments on a number of occasions. Second, it is equally possible that as a speaker of the language, and worse a linguist with certain expectations (and hopes!), I also 'heard' auxiliaries where they did not occur. Third, as some commentators on an earlier draft of this paper have pointed out, when a consonant final verb which takes the *-t* allomorph of the past tense morpheme *-ed* is followed by *to* it is almost impossible to distinguish between the presence and absence of the *-ed* — for example, in casual conversation *talk to* may be phonetically indistinguishable from *talked to*. This list is far from complete, and in many other phonetic environments it is extremely difficult to be sure whether or not the non-salient past tense morpheme *-ed* has occurred.

For the above reasons it was decided to undertake a small pilot study in which tape recordings would be gathered. Thus, in mid-1993 some six hours of dinner-table conversation were tape recorded,<sup>4</sup> as were three episodes (six hours) of the ABC radio programme *Australia all over*. The tags from these recordings — which include a score or so of interrogative tags — were broadly transcribed phonetically, and their intonation contours marked in. (However, even with tape recordings it is not always possible to be certain whether or not the interrogative stem clause has an operator.)

### **3. Types of interrogative tags and their formal properties**

Interrogative tags are subject to a number of quite strong formal restrictions. To begin with, only polar interrogatives may be tagged in Australian English; I have observed no examples of tagged information interrogatives. Examples such as (6), cited by Bolinger as acceptable in American English, do not occur (to the best of my knowledge) in Australian English.

- (6) *How did he get there did he?*  
(Bolinger 1957, cited in Hudson 1975:29)

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<sup>4</sup>Most of this was recorded in the investigator's home. I am also grateful to Margaret Carew for providing me with a recording of a mealtime conversation from her home. It is, however, beyond the scope of the present investigation to include intonation amongst the parameters to be investigated. Moreover, as I have suggested elsewhere, the different intonational phenomena

do not affect the core meanings of the various tag constructions, but modify the degree to which the speaker attests to the proposition uttered. That is, whether e.g. the tag of *You're going aren't you* is uttered in on a rising tone

In the polar interrogative tag construction both the stem clause and the tag must be positive: that is, only same polarity positive tags are permissible (see also Cattell 1973:616). Examples such as (7) and (8) appear to be impossible — and there is not a single example resembling either in the corpus. (An explanation for this restriction is provided in section 8.)

- (7) \*Are(n't) you going now aren't you?  
(8) \*Aren't you going now are you?

Australian English shows in addition to the standard polar interrogative consisting of an initial operator followed by the subject (as in e.g. *Did you see her?*), various other polar interrogative types. At least three of these take question tags: WH polar interrogatives, non-finite interrogatives and WH non-finite interrogatives. Some other types appear not to, including, for example, interrogatives with final *or* or *or what* (as in *Did you see him yesterday or (what)*) and, unsurprisingly, interrogatives which are already tagged.

WH polar interrogatives are polar interrogatives which take the standard polar form, except that they have an initial *what*; (9) is an example of this not uncommon type in Australian English:<sup>5</sup>

- (9) *What did you see him just then?*

It should be noted that the initial *what* is not necessarily set off on a separate intonation contour; for example, (9) was uttered on a single contour. Indeed, *what* frequently fuses phonetically with the following operator: in (9), *what* and *did* may be realised as [wɔdɪd]. It is clear that there is a syntactic relationship between the initial *what* and the following interrogative clause;

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or on a falling one, the core meaning remains the same, and all that differs is the 'complexion' the speaker puts on the proposition. A rising tone on the tag indicates an inclination to believe the proposition (Huddleston 1984:375; cf. Young 1980:64), and a request for the hearer to indicate whether or not it is true. A falling tone on the tag indicates a commitment to the truth of the proposition plus a request for the hearer's confirmation (Huddleston 1984:375; cf. Young 1980:64). In other words, tone constitutes a more delicate system of options, which may be safely ignored in an account of the present degree of generality. (McGregor 1995:94-95)

In any event, as I point out in notes 5 and 6, intonation is irrelevant to the definition of the interrogative mood in English.

<sup>5</sup> It seems to hardly require argument that this construction type is indeed interrogative. If we adopt, as seems reasonable, the characterisation of interrogative according to the order of the operator (or finite element) and subject (e.g. Halliday 1985:74), and/or according to the presence of an initial WH word, then it is clearly interrogative rather than declarative or imperative. Intonation is irrelevant.

in particular, *what* holds the interrogative in its scope, modalising it (McGregor 1990:28ff and 1995). Of course, *what* may constitute its own separate contour, as in *What? Did you see him just then?* But this is presumably a bi-sentential construction rather than a single sentence which (9) clearly is in Australian English.

As has already been mentioned, WH polar interrogatives may be tagged; (10) is perfectly acceptable in Australian English (see also (4) above):

(10) *What did you see him just then did you?*

I use the term non-finite interrogative to refer to a type of syntactic construction, exemplified by (11), in which there is no initial operator or primary tense marker on the verb: that is, no Finite element (to use Halliday's 1985:72 terminology).

(11) *He tell you that yesterday?*

In identifying (11) as an interrogative clause, I follow Quirk et al 1985:898, who propose that such examples involve the ellipsis of the operator from the corresponding full interrogative *Did he tell you that yesterday?* Quirk et al 1985:896-897 argue that (11) cannot be declarative, since ellipsis in a declarative clause is of either the subject alone, or the subject plus operator, never of just the operator alone. Additional evidence that (11) is an interrogative comes from the fact that it may be tagged, as shown by (12):

(12) *Someone being a bit silly is he?*

However, only positive same polarity tags are possible, which strongly suggests that the elliptical clause could not be declarative, since declaratives permit both same and reverse polarity tags. Moreover, just as ordinary polar interrogatives show corresponding WH polar interrogatives which may be tagged, so too are there WH non-finite interrogatives corresponding to non-finite interrogatives, which may also be tagged. This is illustrated by (13), which is, incidentally, the only example of this type in the corpus:

(13) *What he just born was he?*

These three pieces of evidence suggest that it is reasonable to regard the non-finite construction as an elliptical interrogative.<sup>6</sup> However, it should not be presumed from this that there is no meaning difference between ordinary

polar interrogatives and non-finite interrogatives — or that the contrast simply resides in a difference in informational status of the operator whereby it is ellipsed when given or predictable (see also McGregor 1995).

In each of the above types of interrogative, then, there is always an operator; if one is not present, as in the case of non-finite interrogatives, it has been ellipsed — but it is nevertheless retrievable, and 'there' in the structure, being indexed by the structural gap (or zero). This operator is repeated in the tag. There is no need to invoke any such 'rule' as *do*-support (as it was called in early transformational writing).

The three main types identified above account for the vast majority (over 95%) of 'unusual' tag types I have recorded. There are, however, a small number which do not fit into these categories. Of these, the only type relevant to this paper shows an initial *what*, begins as a WH information interrogative, and supplies a possible answer:

(14) *So what's this a Croydon shopping trolley is it?*

As is the case for WH interrogatives, examples such as (14) are typically uttered on a single intonation contour. I suggest that the WH word, the interrogative clause and the elliptical answer together form a single unit, the stem; this entire unit lies in the scope of, and is modalised by, the tag. Whether or not this stem may be regarded as a single clause is irrelevant — stems vary in size from single words to entire complex sentences (see McGregor 1995).

Table I shows the frequency of the main types of interrogative tag identified above.

#### 4. Polar interrogative tags

Polar interrogative tags are a special type of interrogative, a modalised polar interrogative. As such, they are typically subject to the sincerity condition of the polar interrogative that 'the speaker believes the hearer knows, at least as reliably as the speaker does, whether the proposition is true or false' (Hudson 1975:11). However, their range of contexts of use is quite restricted by comparison with the plain interrogative. They occur only when there is some evidence that the proposition expressed is in fact the case, and that this is contrary to what the speaker would have (or might have)

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arguments for treating this construction as interrogative not completely compelling, any comprehensive account of tags in Australian English must deal with the fact that what I have called non-finite interrogatives do take tags. And the fact that there is no account of this tag construction in the literature justifies its inclusion in this study, and the efforts in section 8 to place it within the overall system of tags. For the same reasons I include discussion of WH information interrogative tags, which are identified next.



otherwise thought. The hearer is requested to confirm or deny the speaker's interpretation of the evidence.

Although the speaker will generally believe the proposition suggested by the evidence, this is not necessarily the case. For one reason or another the speaker may draw an interpretation which is at odds with their own beliefs. Contextual — and possibly prosodic — cues will generally suggest whether they do or do not believe the proposition. The polar interrogative tag invokes agreement from the hearer with the speaker's apparent beliefs. In other words, like ordinary reverse polarity declarative tags (see e.g. Hudson 1975:26) — but unlike plain polar interrogatives — polar interrogative tags are always conducive: that is, they always invoke some expected response from the addressee. This may be either in the affirmative or negative, depending on context and on the interactive goals of the speaker.

<i>Type</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Polar	360	80%
WH finite	20	4%
WH information	6	1%
Non-finite	65	14%

*Table I: Frequency of interrogative tag types*

The core meaning of the polar interrogative tag may be glossed along the following lines:

*Polar interrogative tag*

- (15) I interrogate P (the proposition expressed by the clause), believing that there is evidence that it may be true, even though I might have thought otherwise. I presume you know at least as well as I do whether P is true, and I anticipate your concurrence with my evaluation of the truth of P. I request you confirm or deny P.

It is suggested that something like (15) is an invariant of meaning inherent to the polar interrogative tag, and common to all instances of use. The critical components of this characterisation are in the first sentence. The first

clause stipulates that the clause remains in interrogative mood,<sup>7</sup> and the following clauses represent modal qualifications. Putting it somewhat crudely, two conditions are juxtaposed — (a) evidence: P; and (b) expectation: not-P.<sup>8</sup> It is these conditions that distinguish polar interrogative tags from the corresponding untagged interrogatives.

Like any grammatical construction, the polar interrogative tag has the potential of occurrence in various situations in which other meanings are acquired as well, as a consequence of the particular contextual conditions and their configurations. These contextual meanings — or function/uses in the terminology of Nichols 1984 — are in the nature of pragmatic or illocutionary functions associated with the utterance instance in its interactive context of use: the core meaning of the polar interrogative tag, that is, has nothing to do with illocutionary function (see also Hudson 1975:6) — this is contextually determined. In fact, despite its restricted range of contexts of occurrence, the polar interrogative tag is used in a wide variety of pragmatic functions, covering much (if not all) of the range of pragmatic functions of plain polar interrogatives. These pragmatic functions may be grouped according to whether they are oriented primarily to speech, or oriented primarily to action. That is, they are primarily oriented either to the purpose of obtaining a verbal response from the addressee — typically one which supplies the desired information — or to the purpose of eliciting a non-verbal, actional response from them (cf. Halliday 1985:68-69). The specific pragmatic functions associated with each of these primary types are as follows (see also Holmes 1986, 1990, 1992, who distinguishes many of the same pragmatic functions):

#### Oriented to speech

Yes-no questions

Rhetorical questions

Response soliciting

Indicating disapproval of apparent state of affairs

Checking reliability of previous utterance of hearer

Checking speaker's interpretation of the situation

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<sup>7</sup> (15) is not intended as a completely accurate and precise characterisation the polar interrogative tag. Rather, it is intended to capture the critical components of the meaning of the polar interrogative tag, especially — but not only — in respect of the contrasts with the plain polar interrogative mood. Similar qualifications apply to the characterisations of other tag constructions provided below.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, West Flemish shows an invariant polar interrogative tag, with the particle *da*, as in *Ee-j unger, da?* (have-you hunger, *da*) 'Are you hungry, are you?' (Haegeman 1993). Haegeman 1994 proposes that the *da*-interrogatives satisfies two conditions, viz:

Oriented to action

Commands

Requests for joint action

Offers

Warnings and challenges

Reassurance

It is important to note that this is not proposed as a linguistically significant typology: it is no more than a (partial) list of pragmatic uses associated with polar interrogative tags, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive (cf. Cameron, McAlinden and O'Leary 1990). Indeed, they represent different levels of generality, some being far more inclusive than others. Nevertheless, it is useful to employ them in this investigation, to give some idea of the range of pragmatic functions that the polar interrogative tag may serve.

This section is divided into three parts. The first two discuss, respectively, the uses of the polar interrogative tag which are oriented primarily to speech and to action. In the course of this discussion we will elucidate evidence that (15) characterises the core meaning of the construction. The third section compares polar interrogative tags with declarative tags.

#### **4.1 Oriented to speech**

##### *4.1.1 Information questions*

Polar interrogative tags — like interrogatives generally — most frequently serve the pragmatic function of questions: they are mostly used for the purpose of eliciting information from the addressee as to the truth or falsity of a proposition. This is illustrated by example (16), uttered by a male athletics trainer to a young boy, while training him to shot put:

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- (i) The proposition P expressed by the question ... is becoming (at least partially) manifest in the questioner's cognitive environment on the basis of independent evidence (linguistic or otherwise).
  - (ii) P is incompatible with the assumptions in the speaker's own cognitive environment. If accepted, it will have the effect of weakening or eliminating some of these assumptions. By means of *da* the speaker of the utterance 'P?, *da*' signals that this type of conflict has arisen.

These are virtually identical to the conditions proposed for the polar interrogative tag in English in the second and third clauses of (15).

(16) *Have you got a sore arm have you?*

This example satisfies (15). The way the boy held the shot put suggested that he might have had a sore arm. In the absence of this behavioural quirk, of course, the trainer would naturally presume that the child had nothing at all wrong with him. In uttering (15), the trainer is requesting that the child confirm his suspicion that he has a sore arm. The corpus shows hundreds of examples exactly like this.

In contrast to tagged polar interrogatives, ordinary polar interrogatives do not implicitly invoke any interpretation of the circumstances, and are usually non-conducive. For example, (17) was produced by a customer in a bakery, late one afternoon, as the first utterance in the service encounter:

(17) *Have you got any tank loaves left?*

In the service encounter in which it occurred, it was clear that the speaker had not evaluated the evidence in front of her: she had not, for example, had time to examine the shelves, or heard any other customer enquiring about bread. The corresponding polar interrogative tag *Have you got some tank loaves left, have you?* would be possible had the customer just overheard from another exchange information that led her to expect that there were in fact some tank loaves left, although this conflicted with she would otherwise have thought (e.g. due to the time of day — late in the afternoon one does not expect to have much choice). (18) is a real example of a comparable polar interrogative tag overheard a service encounter in a newsagency:

(18) *Is all the Sunday Mail sold out are they?*

The significant difference from the context for (17) was that the customer had just come across to the counter from the shelf on which the newspapers were usually located, where he had been looking without success for the *Sunday Mail*.

(16) and (18) are positively conducive: the speaker clearly expects an affirmative response from the addressee, in agreement with their own interpretation. Although this seems to be the most common situation, negatively conducive polar interrogative tag questions do occur, and they seem to carry some suggestion of disbelief on the part of the speaker in the evaluation they have just made. An example is (19), spoken by a woman to her husband as he was about to set off in the car with their two children.

(19) *Are they in the car are they?*

The speaker had gone out the front door of the house to see the children off,

and uttered this sentence on not seeing them on the path where she expected to find them — which gave rise to the possibility that they were sitting in the car (which was not visible from that position). But this interpretation was in conflict with her general knowledge that in such circumstances the children were normally to be found playing somewhere in the yard. The negative conduciveness of (19) is evidenced by the fact that some surprise was expressed on hearing an affirmative response.

#### *4.1.2 Rhetorical questions*

Like ordinary polar interrogatives, tagged polar interrogatives can be used rhetorically: not seriously in an attempt to extract information from another person, but rather to produce some effect on them. Rhetorical use of polar interrogative tags is strongly associated with verbal repartee and jocular language use. This usage is premised on the interpretative component of the core meaning of the construction: the speaker makes an unlikely, even crazy, inference on the basis of the available evidence — usually what the addressee has just said or done. Thus they are negatively conducive: a negative response is anticipated; indeed it is so likely that an expression in speech is quite unnecessary. Laughter is the desired response. In fact, the majority of negatively conducive polar interrogative tags I have collected were used in repartee. Let us consider some examples. (20) was uttered by a woman to her sister-in-law, on hearing the latter say that she was thinking of an outing to Movie World for her son's birthday, instead of a party. Combining this proposition with the proposition that children's birthdays are usually celebrated with a number of children, the first woman derives the highly unlikely conclusion that the second is planning to take a dozen kids on the outing — a fearful prospect to any normal person!

(20)  $\emptyset$  *you going to shout a dozen kids there are you?*

( $\emptyset$  represents phonetically reduced *are*.) The humour lies in the contrast between the consequence derived by the speaker and normal expectations about human behaviour. Polar interrogative tags are effective vehicles for humour in as much as they involve conflicting inferences and expectations as part of their core meanings.

Rhetorical usage of the interrogative tag, however, is not necessarily associated with joking use of language. For example, (21) was uttered by a woman to her husband during a conversation in which the latter had been suggesting that contrary to what she was claiming, she in fact liked studying.

(21) *Do you want me to study full time next semester do you?*

This neatly parried his suggestions, by invoking the clearly unwelcome prospect of his having to endure further complaints about the quite unsatisfactory degree course she was studying in the local university college.

*4.1.3 Response soliciting*  
Because they frequently repeat information which is already present in the context of the conversation — even if not absolutely certain — at times the primary function of interrogative tags appears to be response soliciting, although in most instances they do somewhat more than this. There are a number of examples in the corpus in which interrogative tags are used apparently in order to more forcefully solicit a response to a previous utterance, which either did not occur (as was the case for the first interrogative clause in example (22)) or was deemed inadequate (as was the non-verbal response in example (23)).

(22) *Was Stewart at work? Was Stewart at work was he?*

(23) A: *Where's Hugh?*

B: [Points to another room.]

A: *Is he in there is he?*

The interrogative tag in (22), of course, retains its pragmatic force as a question; but by the third turn of (23) A has already obtained the relevant information, and is demanding a particular type of formulation.

#### *4.1.4 Indicating disapproval*

By virtue of the fact that interrogative tags counterpose the proposition with the speaker's otherwise expectations to the contrary, an element of disapproval is frequently apparent, as in (1) and (18). Indeed, this element of disapproval may come to the fore if there is little doubt as to the truth of the proposition, the speaker indicating that they wish the proposition were not true, even though it apparently is. Thus in (24), the speaker, a young mother, is complaining to a man at a Little Athletics meeting about the fact that the girls had apparently been put to run before the boys in the following race.

(24) *Have they put the girls first have they?*

In the context in which (24) was uttered there was little doubt that the proposition was in fact true, and the speaker was hardly likely to require this particular piece of information — that is, it was not uttered as a genuine question. Rather, the speaker was giving voice to her displeasure at this state of affairs, which displeasure she could reasonably presume she would share with the addressee — being jointly in charge of a group of boys, they would naturally want to get the race over as soon as possible, and not be waiting around for too long.

It is not, of course, being suggested that a clear distinction can be made between information oriented tags (questions) and affect oriented tags (indicating disapproval). Clearly information may be exchanged in both types, and conversely both types may be used to express disapproval. What is suggested is only that the distinction may reasonably be drawn in many

instances, and that it correlates with the primary function of the particular tag, according to whether or not the speaker is seriously seeking information. Interrogative tags may, that is, be multifunctional. On the other hand, there do exist a relatively few instances in which the information is clearly already known, and thus the utterance is not intended as a genuine question.

#### *4.1.5 Checking reliability*

Polar interrogative tags are sometimes used with what might be referred to as a checking function; the speaker checks the evidential basis for the addressee's previous utterance — usually a statement — in order to determine its reliability or reasonableness: on what basis has the addressee said what they have just said? For example, (25) was uttered by a mother to her child, in response to his telling her that she had to do the cleaning — normally done by her husband — the following day, a day when her husband would be away, as both interactants knew.

(25) *Did daddy say that did he?*

Quite often a speaker will attempt to ascertain the reliability or reasonableness of the addressee's previous utterance in order to determine whether action called for in that utterance should be undertaken. (26) was addressed to a customer at a bookshop in response to a his enquiry as to whether they had a particular title:

(26) *Have you looked down there have you?*

What the assistant was doing was trying to ascertain whether the speaker had already made a search in the appropriate place on the shelves before she undertook a computer search for the title. The interrogative tag is particularly suitable for this purpose, since on the one hand it indicates that the speaker accepts that the other interactant is making a reasonable request (by acknowledging that it would appear that they have undertaken relevant preliminary action), while at the same time raising the possibility that they might be mistaken, or may not have thought of all of the relevant potentialities before troubling the service person, this possibility being invoked by the fact that the polar interrogative tag indicates that the proposition also comes as a surprise.

The particular configuration of contextual factors in examples such as (26) appears to make the interrogative tag less intrusive, less threatening than the agnate plain interrogative: (26) would seem to be less face-threatening than *Have you looked down there?*, which invokes no suggestion that there is any evidence that the addressee has made any attempt to look for the book themselves, thus suggesting that they should do so before troubling the assistant. Thus, by using an interrogative tag the speaker reinforces solidarity with the addressee by indicating that the latter has laid

appropriate groundwork before making their request.

#### 4.1.6 *Checking interpretations*

Interrogative tags may be used to ascertain the appropriate action for the speaker to perform — or whether in fact action is required at all — by inquiring as to whether the speaker has correctly interpreted the state of affairs. In such cases the hearer is (presumed to be) better positioned to have the relevant information than the speaker. (27) was spoken by a waitress to a group of customers sitting at a table in a motel restaurant; the customers were all apparently attending the same conference, and thus might reasonably be presumed to have some knowledge of one another's affairs.

(27) *Is this where he's sitting is it?*

The point of this utterance was not simply to gather information, but to gather it for the specific purpose of deciding on the appropriate action to take: whether (and where) to leave the breakfast she had just brought into the dining room.

Quite frequently what is being checked is whether or not the speaker is imposing on someone else by virtue of their present or recent action — and thus whether some corrective action is called for. (28) was addressed by a man to his young son, while he (the former) was crouching in a narrow corridor of a railway carriage, going through his belongings looking for something — the addressee was in a position to see what the speaker could not see without looking up.

(28) *Am I in someone's way am I?*

Sometimes a speaker uses an interrogative tag not to establish the necessity of their own action, but that of the addressee, who appears to be doing something without due consideration of the range of possible contingencies. (29), spoken by a woman to her husband as he was setting off to a speciality shop one Sunday morning, exemplifies this:

(29) *Is Tony open all day Sunday is he?*

This utterance was clearly intended to prompt the addressee to consider, before setting off, whether his trip would be wasted.

As for action, so also for information: the interrogative tag may be employed to suggest the hearer believes something without sufficient evidence — that they have expressed some opinion which the speaker finds unjustified, with the implication that they rethink the matter, or that they are being disingenuous (as in (30), where context made it clear that the hearer's claim to be aware of the need to replace some household item was false), or that they are naive in their views (as in (31)).



(30) *Did you realise that did you?*

(31) *Do you believe that priests are celibate do you?*

## 4.2 Oriented to action

### 4.2.1 Commands

An example of a polar interrogative tag being used as a command is provided by (32), which was spoken by a woman to her child as she was about to go out shopping; she was instructing the child stop watching television and get ready to go out. It had previously been established that the boy wanted to go out shopping with his mother, which constituted evidence that the proposition should be true; however, this contradicted the expectation, based on current perceptual evidence, that the proposition would turn out to be false — the child had obviously made no effort to get ready. Thus (32) satisfies (15).

(32) *Are you coming with me are you Samuel?*

This did not appear to be a particularly strong or insistent order — certainly not in comparison to the use of an imperative such as *Get ready immediately Samuel*. Rather, it seemed to be a qualified command, qualified by reference to the child's formerly expressed desires. He is being told that if he wants to go out he must get ready immediately or otherwise he will be left behind. It is really up to him himself whether he does so or not.

Polar interrogative tags are not infrequently found attached to stem clauses which project into the future, the speaker interpreting available evidence as indicative of future action. Almost all such stems are in the present continuous, as in (1) and (32). (33) is unusual in that it is one of only three or four polar interrogative tags in which *will* occurs.

(33) *Sammy will you move your body will you?*

The speaker is asserting that there is evidence that the proposition will be true at some time in the future.<sup>9</sup> It is important to observe that I have nowhere claimed that it is a sincerity condition on the utterance of a polar interrogative tag that there actually be evidence for the truth of the proposition (although this will normally be the case, given that speakers generally satisfy the cooperative principle). Rather, this 'condition' represents part of the core meaning of the construction, which is asserted by the speaker. Here the speaker is apparently flouting the maxim of quality

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<sup>9</sup>Of course, *will* marks other meanings than the simple future, including willingness, insistence, prediction, and so on. This does not affect the explanation developed here, which assumes no more than that in this particular case the clause designates a situation — that of the child moving his body — which has not yet come into being, irrespective of the child's willingness to do as he was told.

(Grice 1975) to her own advantage — the only evidence that the proposition will be true is that she has given the command. However, that the event will occur is also contrary to what might have been expected, given the child's behaviour up to then: prior to (33) an unsuccessful attempt had already been made to get the child to move. The addressee is expected to confirm the speaker's interpretation of the circumstances by actually performing the action. Thus it would seem that (33) represents a more insistent command than does the agnate ordinary interrogative *Sammy will you move your body?* — by virtue of the implicit evaluation of the proposition as being true on the basis of present evidence. On the other hand, it appears to remain more polite and indirect than the imperative *Sammy move your body*.

As a final example let us consider (34), which exemplifies a very indirect form of command, one in which there is no explicit reference to the action to be performed — in this case, to be desisted from. It was uttered by a man at a Little Athletics meeting in an attempt to control his young son, who was jumping around him and being silly:

(34) *Have you gone mad have you?*

Observe here that the speaker is relying on the fact that the child's behaviour may be interpreted as madness — and thus there is evidence for the proposition that he has gone mad. This is juxtaposed to an expectation to the contrary: the speaker does not expect this quality in his child. The implication is that the child should behave in such a way as not to give this appearance. (34) may thus be regarded as a negatively conducive command: clearly to the extent that a verbal response is expected, it is 'No'; and the actional response is also in the nature of a negative — the child should cease doing what he is presently doing, and act more sensibly. (34) thus contrasts with (32) and (33) which are positively conducive.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4.2.2 Requests for joint action

Polar interrogative tags are also used to express what could be regarded as first person commands, commands which concern joint action of speaker and hearer — and which are realised directly by first person imperatives such as *Lets do it*):

(35) *Are you ready now are you Helen?*

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<sup>10</sup> By using such an indirect command it may be that the father was attempting to make the child understand the foolishness of his actions, and thus understand the directive not just as an unmotivated exercise of control. The intended effect may have been something like 'stop what you are doing because it is in your own best interests (as you should understand)', rather than 'stop what you are doing because I say so'.

The point of this utterance seems to have been that the speaker evaluates the time as being right for a cup of tea before she sets off on a long motor car drive (otherwise, there would be no time for a drink), even though this seems to be doubtful given that the addressee was then engaged in a conversation with someone else, which did not appear to be likely to end in the near future.

#### *4.2.3 Offers*

(36) illustrates the use of a polar interrogative tag as an offer. It was uttered by a mother to her son who was struggling with a dispenser of sticky tape, evidently experiencing difficulty in getting a piece off.

*(36) Do you want a bit of sticky tape do you?*

Here the speaker has interpreted the circumstances as indicating that the child is trying to get a piece of sticky tape, although she was not previously aware of this desire (as he had not made a request, and the mother had just noticed the child). This utterance was followed by agreement by the child, and performance of the action by the mother.

#### *4.2.4 Warnings and challenges*

Example (37), which comes from the ABC TV programme GP, was uttered by an irate man to a psychiatrist who was trying to calm him down, and to bring him under control, as he had been threatening the secretary.

*(37) Are you going to shut me up are you?*

The pragmatic force of this utterance appeared to be a warning to the psychiatrist not to interfere, not to attempt to control him — or perhaps a challenge to him to attempt to try! In uttering this, the speaker is giving clear expression to his expectation that the addressee would not be physically able to control him — i.e. that the proposition would be false — but that there was some evidence that he may in fact be wrong: the addressee was clearly doing something which could be interpreted as bringing about the state of affairs denoted by the proposition (by the use of language rather than physical means).

#### *4.2.5 Providing reassurance*

In a small number of instances the interrogative tag appears to be used to reassure someone: it is indicated that although something unexpected has happened to the addressee, no harm will come of it. This appears to have been what was intended by the speaker of (38); this was spoken by a woman to her young child who had just been brought out to her by her brother (who did not know the child well) on finding the child awake following her afternoon nap:

(38) *Did Bill get you did he?*

This usage appears to be restricted to circumstances in which the proposition is uncontestably true, and both speaker and hearer know it. The interpretative component of the polar interrogative tag is thus satisfied. However, it conflicts with the normal expectation that it would be the child's parents who would have attended to the child, rather than a relative stranger. On the face of it, it would appear that this expectation would be the child's rather than the parent's. However, the speaker's deployment of an interrogative tag marks the expectation as the parent's also — thus promoting empathy between mother and child.

#### 4.3 Relation to declarative tags

It will be clear from the discussion so far that polar interrogative tags have a wide range of specific pragmatic functions — and many more are identifiable than have been discussed above. Ultimately, it seems pointless to go on listing pragmatic functions of increasing specificity, when no list could possibly be exhaustive. What I have said so far should give a feel for some of the major ways in which speakers deploy interrogative tags in conversational interaction, and how contextualisations of (15) are invoked and exploited. To conclude this section, we look briefly at the contrast between interrogative tags and ordinary declarative tags. Ignoring intonation, the latter fall into four types: same or different polarity varieties of positive or negative stem clauses. These are illustrated in (39)-(42):

(39) *And they've rung you about that have they?*  
(same polarity; positive stem)

(40) *And they've rung you about that haven't they?*  
(different polarity; positive stem)

(41) *And they haven't rung you about that have they?*  
(different polarity; negative stem)

(42) *And they haven't rung you about that haven't they?*  
(same polarity; negative stem)

(39) was uttered by a sales assistant in the layby section of a large department store to a customer who presented her with a raincheck. The other examples are constructed from it.

Opinions about the pragmatic functions of declarative tags differ considerably; indeed, the literature contains many differences of opinion and contradictory claims.<sup>11</sup> In regard to reverse polarity tags, it is generally

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<sup>11</sup> Linguists can't even agree as to the mood of declarative tags: although most hold that they are a type of modalised declarative, some see them as being a type of interrogative (e.g. Hudson 1975:26, Lyons 1977:764).

believed that the speaker puts forward the proposition as something they hold to (not necessarily firmly), and seek agreement from the hearer (e.g. Cattell 1973:615; Huddleston 1970:221, 1984:75; Hudson 1975:26). Thus, (40) would involve an assertion *they've rung you*, while (41) would involve the assertion *they haven't rung you*, both being qualified by the request for the hearer's agreement. The contrast between the interrogative tag and the reverse polarity tag is fairly clear: the latter represents a proposition which the speaker holds, and advances, not necessarily strongly, with some qualification — with an admission that it may be false. The former does not; the interrogative tag remains an interrogative, the proposition expressed being interrogated rather than declared.

Examination of the transcripts in Halliday and Poole 1978 shows that for most reverse polarity declarative tags the speaker elaborates on, or enhances on, what has been previously said, reinterpreting it, advancing the discourse. Take (43), for example:

(43) *You won't forget it then, will you?*

Here the speaker was explaining why she believed it necessary to learn basically the same sort of thing at school over a period of three years, to another student who has said that she couldn't understand the motivation for this.<sup>12</sup> Reverse polarity tags are speaker oriented, and advance the discourse by adding information to it which the speaker believes (at least to some extent). Interrogative tags, by contrast, are hearer oriented; rather than advance the discourse, they often backtrack, and repeat information previously provided in — or implied by — the conversation, which nevertheless the speaker wants confirmed, because it is unexpected (or the speaker pretends it is unexpected).

There is less agreement about same polarity tags. Cattell 1973:615 provides a characterisation which — with some modification — seems to best fit the facts: he suggests that the proposition expressed by the stem is not advanced by the speaker as their own opinion, but in order to determine whether it is the hearer's opinion (see also Hudson 1975:27).<sup>13</sup> But there is more to it than this: the proposition advanced may not be any arbitrary one,

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<sup>12</sup> According to some accounts of tags, it is presumed by the speaker that the hearer knows at least as well as the speaker does that the proposition is true (e.g. Hudson 1975). This cannot be taken at face value, for as (43) indicates it may be clear that the speaker cannot be making such a presumption — cf. also Cheshire 1981:375-377. But the very act producing this utterance invokes this presumption, thus forcing it on the hearer: the hearer is being told that she knows as well as the speaker that the proposition is indeed true.

<sup>13</sup> Cattell 1973:615 goes on to suggest that his description applies to same polarity negative tags like (42) also, where the proposition advanced is the negative one expressed by the clause. However, this does not agree with my intuition that it is

but must be one which is put forward on the basis of an interpretation of the evidence. As a number of commentators have observed, same polarity tags frequently repeat information just given by the hearer (e.g. Young 1980:66, Wierzbicka 1991:224) — and thus they are hearer oriented, like interrogative tags.

Further (as for the interrogative tag) there appears to be a suggestion that the speaker expected something other than that the proposition was true. Being attached to a declarative rather than an interrogative, this contextualises in a slightly different way: it modalises the declarative (see also Levinson 1983/1992:261), indicating that the speaker admits to not knowing that the proposition was true beforehand, that it presents information which he/she evaluates as new to himself/herself. In effect, the speaker advances the proposition in a qualified way since the information it contains is new to him or her, and is based on an interpretation of some aspect of the situation. The evidential basis of the proposition is thus not particularly certain. What this suggests is that same polarity tags to positive declarative clauses modalise the clause in the same way as tags to interrogative clauses. The differences between the two constructions are thus quite subtle, and depend on the mood of the stem, and its interaction with the mood of the tag. Thus I suggest something like (44) as a characterisation of the same polarity positive declarative tag:

#### *Same polarity positive declarative tag*

- (44) I declare P (the proposition expressed by the clause), presuming that it may be true on the basis of an interpretation of relevant evidence, although without this evidence I would not necessarily have thought so. You are likely to have (or should have) knowledge at least as reliable as I do; I request your confirmation.

It should be noted carefully that I am not suggesting that the polar interrogative tag (or same polarity declarative tag) is restricted to contexts in which the speaker actually did think at some time prior to encountering the new evidence that the proposition was false. Quite manifestly this is false, as examples such as (16) demonstrate. Rather, the grammatical construction itself invokes this expectation, so that if it did not exist in

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virtually restricted to contexts in which the speaker is strongly contradicting a claim made previously by the addressee. Thus my understanding is that the normal context for (42) would be one in which the addressee had claimed not to have been called, and the speaker is refuting this — and thus, like the same polarity positive tag, the proposition is one that is put forward on the basis of an examination of the circumstances. However, I have no examples in my corpus with which to back up this suggestion.

reality, then it is constructed as a reasonable expectation to have had at the time, in hindsight. So, in (16) the coach most likely did not actually think at any time 'this child is in adequate physical condition'; he would have simply presupposed it.

### **5. Non-finite interrogative tags**

Examination of the corpus of non-finite interrogative tags reveals that there is one significant difference from polar interrogative tags: there is no implied contrast between the proposition and the speaker's expectations in the absence of the evidence leading them to believe that the proposition was a reasonable possibility. It appears to be neutral in terms of the relationship between the proposition and other expectations the speaker may have had. Thus:

#### *Non-finite interrogative tag*

- (45) I interrogate P (the proposition expressed by the clause), believing that there is evidence that it may be true. I presume you know at least as well as I do whether P is true; please confirm my interpretation.

This absence of implied contrast between the proposition and interlocutor's expectations is brought out clearly by the following example, from a conversation between a woman and her son. The boy had been attempting to explain something about an object. At the point where this utterance occurred, the woman was unable to determine what sort of object he was talking about, but evidence from what he had said seemed to point to it being a toy. This did not contrast with any expectation to the contrary, that it was not a toy.

- (46) *A toy is it?*

Non-finite interrogative tags show various contextual uses, as follows:

#### Oriented to information

Yes-no questions

Rhetorical questions

Facilitators

Seeking reassurance that message has been correctly interpreted

Softening the force of a criticism

#### Oriented to action

Reminders of promised action

Offers of service

Example (46) illustrates the use of the non-finite interrogative tag in questions. In the following subsections we discuss the remaining pragmatic functions in order.

### 5.1 Rhetorical questions

Like polar interrogative tags, non-finite interrogative tags may be used rhetorically, and this usage is strongly associated with verbal repartee, as is illustrated by examples such as (47), spoken by my wife to myself while discussing the 'joys' of editing. As this illustrates, non-finite interrogative tags are negatively conducive when used rhetorically.

(47) *You a masochist are you?*

In cases like this, the effect of the quip is in fact strengthened by use of the non-finite tag rather than the polar interrogative tag, since it suggests that the proposition does not run counter to any expectation to the contrary: it is presented as an interpretation of the situation which does not conflict with previous knowledge, even though it is unlikely.

### 5.2 Facilitators

Non-finite tags are sometimes used to facilitate interaction between the interactants, as a means of engaging the other in conversation, as it were by invitation rather than by force. (48) was spoken by a time-keeper at a Little Athletics meeting to a young girl who had come down to his end of the track just prior to a race in which her brother was running. (Both children were known to the time keeper.)

(48) *You come to watch your brother run have you?*

My interpretation is that the speaker's intention was to speak gently to the child, being careful not to frighten her — a very real possibility given the situation: persons in official capacity in the Little Athletics meetings often utter directives to the children. Use of an interrogative tag in this context would have been rather more intrusive, and could have been interpreted by the child as a challenge to her having come down to that end of the track.

Obviously utterances like (48) request information. However, the information is of little importance, and the utterance is clearly more oriented to getting the interaction going or to keep it going. By contrast, information exchanged in polar interrogative tags tends to be more significant: indeed, my original hypothesis was that interrogative tags picked out contextually important information, needed for the correct interpretation of the hearer's words or deeds. And although they also, of course, elicit a response from the hearer — thus helping to keep the exchange going — they do so in a more confrontational way than non-finite tags, drawing the hearer into argument or discussion by counterposing P with an expected not-P. Both types often repeat previously given or



blatantly obvious information, as in (49) and (50). But whereas the first implies no doubt of the proposition, in the second the speaker indicates that she would have expected that she was faster than her son — it thus contradicts the previous claims, rather than upholds them. This property reduces their usability as facilitators.

(49) *David Forder's mother doing a course at college this year is she?*

(50) *Am I slower than Samuel am I?*

### **5.3 Seeking reassurance**

Non-finite tags are sometimes used when the speaker is seeking reassurance that they have understood the hearer correctly, without at the same time casting doubt on the proposition expressed. Thus (51) was uttered by myself to my wife, who had just told me to give some icecream to a child who was not normally allowed it.

(51) *I give Hugh some of this will I?*

By not giving voice to my expectation that I should not give the boy icecream I was precluding the possibility of the hearer presuming that I was casting doubt on the wisdom her previous words. Thus it was clear that I was merely seeking assurance that I had correctly interpreted the instruction.

### **5.4 Softners**

Absence of the clause 'even though I might have thought otherwise' in (45) does not necessarily imply that the speaker did not in fact think otherwise. Indeed, the speaker may choose, for one reason or another, to suppress the unexpectedness of the proposition, particularly if it is perfectly clear from the context. This explains two instances of non-finite tags from the ITV TV programme *The Bill*, which I initially thought were counterexamples to (45), possibly representing dialectal differences between Australian and British English (the corpus contains no Australian English examples with comparable pragmatic functions). Careful examination, however, reveals that they are not counterexamples. (52) occurred in a context in which it was clear that the speaker did not think much of the addressee's (a policeman) ability to protect him; the second was a challenge by the CID DI to a younger officer who appeared to be challenging his authority by giving him and his staff too many orders.

(52) *You going to protect me are you?*

(53) *You taken over here have you?*

Both utterances clearly indicate that the speaker believes the proposition to be false. But by employing a non-finite tag rather than an interrogative tag,

the force of the implied disagreement with the hearer — and challenge in the case of (53) — is softened significantly.

### 5.5 Action oriented

Few non-finite interrogative tags appear to be action oriented, and those that are appear to be quite non-threatening — no examples show the use of this tag type in ordinary commands. Represented in the corpus are just two subtypes of action oriented pragmatic senses. In one the utterance functions as a reminder to the addressee of previously promised action. This is illustrated in (54), uttered by a woman to her husband one evening, reminding him that he had previously promised to put the children to bed:

(54) *You going to put them to bed are you?*

The second pragmatic function might be glossed as offer of service. Thus, (55) was uttered by a newsagent to a customer who was apparently (though not necessarily) next in line to be served: she was the closest to the counter, although there was another customer not far off, who was also clearly awaiting service.

(55) *You next are you?*

The advantage of the non-finite interrogative tag is that it permits the speaker to request confirmation of their interpretation without suggesting that there is anything unexpected about it.<sup>14</sup>

## 6. WH polar interrogative tags

As mentioned on page 8 above, WH polar interrogatives are like ordinary polar interrogatives, except that they have an initial *what*, which seems to indicate an element of surprise (compare the use of *what* as an interjection). Their meaning may be glossed roughly as 'It seems that (or I think that) P may be the case, which I find surprising; is it really true?'. For example, (56) was uttered by my wife to me, on finding me working at my desk:

(56) *What are you working on your tags?*

In the context of its occurrence it was clear that she was surprised to find me working — although knowing I was, it was most likely that I would have been working on an earlier version of this paper, which I was preparing for a conference. Because the WH polar interrogative conveys an element of surprise, it is frequently the case that the speaker believes

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<sup>14</sup> *Are you next are you?* would be more likely in a circumstance in which the salesperson saw evidence they interpreted as indicating that the customer was jockeying for next position.

another explanation better accounts for the facts. Thus WH polar interrogatives are frequently followed by *or what?* — as in (57), from Halliday and Poole 1978:10 — or just by plain *or* (usually pronounced [ɔ:ə?]), inviting a better explanation.

(57) *What, are you going to get a Thursday night job, or what?*

Tagged WH polar interrogatives appear to satisfy both the description of the polar interrogative tag (i.e. (15)), and the description of the WH polar interrogative. These constructions share important characteristics: both are interpretative (i.e. for each there is some reason to suppose that P), and (as interrogatives) both presume the hearer knows at least as well as the speaker themselves whether P is true. But the WH polar interrogative tag enhances the counterfactuality of the polar interrogative tag by marking the proposition as also surprising (for other reasons). Thus (58) is suggested as a characterisation of the core meaning of the WH polar interrogative tag:

(58) I interrogate P, believing that there is evidence that P may be true, even though I might have thought otherwise; moreover, I find P surprising. I presume you know at least as well as I do whether P is true; am I right or not in supposing P to be true?

(59) was uttered by my wife on my asking her the name of a railway enthusiast we had briefly met some months previously. At the time I was reading a rail magazine, and this was the response I received. She presumed from my question that I had seen something in the magazine which I thought was by this person, and that I was checking with her to see if my memory of his name was correct. Her response enquires into the validity of her interpretation, and marks it as both unexpected — the only evidence for it is the question itself — and surprising (that he would have been published in a magazine).

(59) *What's he writing in there is he?*

All available instances of WH polar interrogative tags are oriented to information. (59) is a yes-no question; sometimes the question is rhetorical, and the utterance is used jokingly. As usual, joking usage appears to be associated with negative conductivity. Thus,

(60) *What are you going to wrap those up in that are you?*

occurred during a conversation between a woman and her husband while they were preparing sandwiches. The man laid out a piece of flat Mexican bread, and began cutting pieces of bread from a French loaf. Interpreting it as a joke, he replied 'Very funny!'

### 7. WH information tags

The stem clause for this tag type is a WH information interrogative plus elliptical answer. As this construction has not been described elsewhere in the literature, we begin by briefly enquiring into its pragmatic functions, before turning to the tagged variety. It must be stressed, however, that the construction is not understood well, and the account does not purport to be definitive. (61) and (62) are examples:

- (61) *Where are they going to the moon?*  
 (62) *What are you doing dropping things on the floor?*

(61) was spoken by myself to my son, who was watching a video in the next room, on hearing a noise I interpreted as being a rocket taking off. It is presumably a question, based on a presumption that someone was going somewhere, although the destination itself was not known, only guessed at. (62) occurred when the speaker heard the addressee uttering [ɔɔʔɔɔʔ] while walking through another room with a bowl of soup.<sup>15</sup> Again it was clear that something had happened (represented by *What are you doing*), but exactly what was not known, and a suggestion is made (*dropping things on the floor*). By suggesting an answer to the WH question, the speaker effectively converts the question into a polar one. But it is a particular type of polar question: one in which part of the proposition is explicitly marked as presupposed, the rest as focal, the point on which the validity of the entire proposition hinges. Usually the presupposed part is the entire proposition minus one term (as in (61)).

The tagged version of this construction contrasts in a similar way with the polar interrogative tag. (63) was spoken by a man minding a group of children at a Little Athletics meeting, speaking to the woman in charge of the group, inquiring as to the next activity — in the context, there was no doubt that there would be another activity (the meeting was only half way through). The speaker has made a suggestion as to what it might be, but the suggestion is a pure guess: it is not based on any interpretation of the surrounding circumstances, activities or speech.

- (63) *What are we meant to be doing next the discuss are we?*

The following characterisation is suggested:

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<sup>15</sup> This clause has another interpretation in which *dropping things on the floor* does not function as a putative 'answer' to the WH interrogative *what are you doing*, but rather questions the right of the hearer to be dropping things on the floor. This interpretation is, I suspect, associated with a different intonation contour.

*WH information tag*

- (64) I interrogate P, believing that it must hold for some unknown value of one of the arguments, predicates, circumstances or whatever. It is possible that the unknown information is X, although this is only a guess, and I have no real evidence for it. I presume you know at least as well as I do whether X is the unknown value; I request you confirm my suggestion.

Like other interrogative tags, the WH information tag may also be used jokingly, as (14) shows. This comes from a video produced by the country and western singer Ted Egan during the course of an interview with a woman who has a museum in her shop in the tiny North Queensland town of Croydon. He utters this on seeing a strange looking four-wheeled object in that museum.

There is a single example in which a WH information tag appears to be oriented to action rather than information:

- (65) *Where are the boys next door are they?*

This was uttered by a woman to her husband, neither having seen or heard of the children for some time, neither having a clue as to their whereabouts. It would seem to convey the implication that the addressee should check on them.

In conclusion, it must be remarked that prosodic features must be taken into account when identifying WH information tags. In the absence of prosodic cues, many admit alternative interpretations as other constructions. (66) might be either a WH polar interrogative tag or a WH information tag:

- (66) *What is it a \$50 note is it?*

However, an intonational hiatus occurred following the first *it*, marking it as a WH information tag.

## **8. Pragmatic function and grammatical form**

Below we put together the semantic characterisations of each interrogative tag type, acknowledging their preliminary status:

### *Polar interrogative tag*

- (15) I interrogate P (the proposition expressed by the clause), believing that there is evidence that it may be true, even though I might have thought otherwise. I presume you know at least as well as I do whether P is true, and I anticipate your

concurrence with my evaluation of the truth of P. I request you confirm or deny P.

*Non-finite interrogative tag*

- (45) I interrogate P (the proposition expressed by the clause), believing that there is evidence that it may be true. I presume you know at least as well as I do whether P is true; please confirm my interpretation.

*WH polar interrogative tag*

- (58) I interrogate P, believing that there is evidence that P may be true, even though I might have thought otherwise; moreover, I find P surprising. I presume you know at least as well as I do whether P is true; am I right or not in supposing P to be true?

*WH information tag*

- (64) I interrogate P, believing that it must hold for some unknown value of one of the arguments, predicates, circumstances or whatever. It is possible that the unknown information is X, although this is only a guess, and I have no real evidence for it. I presume you know at least as well as I do whether X is the unknown value; I request you confirm my suggestion.

Clearly the first three types are more closely related to one another than any is to the fourth. They may be regarded as forming a paradigm, a small system of options. Interrogative tags can be either: (i) finite or non-finite; (ii) WH or plain. This permits us to place (13): it is the fourth member of the paradigm, a WH non-finite tag. Unfortunately, as the only example of its type, no certain conclusion can be drawn. However, we may hypothesise that, as is the case for WH information tags, the WH non-finite construction conveys an element of surprise — the speaker finds the proposition surprising. And indeed, (13) did convey surprise: it was uttered in mock surprise as a response to a statement by a young boy that there was a new boy at his school that day, which the speaker of the tag interpreted literally for the purpose of verbal play.

As has been stressed from the outset, and specified in the first clause of each semantic characterisation, tagged interrogatives remain interrogatives. They all show two additional features in common: it is asserted that there is some evidence for the proposition, and secondly, confirmation of this is requested. In both respects the tagged constructions are more specific than the ordinary interrogative, which does not (necessarily) presume any evidence for the proposition, and simply requests

an indication as to the hearer's belief or opinion.

It is now possible to understand the apparently anomalous formal restriction on interrogative tags mentioned in section 3: the absence of tagged negative interrogatives — a gap Cattell 1973:616 described as inexplicable. The explanation depends on the observation that negative interrogatives are not just polar interrogatives phrased in the negative — they are not, as one might be led to expect from a 'logical' perspective, simply alternative expressions of the same meaning: 'Is P or not-P true?' vs. 'Is not-P or P true?'. Rather, they invoke an evaluation of the evidence as suggesting that P is false, and counterpose this to an expectation that it would be (or should be) true (e.g. Quirk et al 1985:808-809, Givón 1984:324). This is precisely contrary to the situation for polar interrogative tags, which invoke an interpretation of the evidence as suggesting P is true, and counterpose this to an expectation that it is false. They are thus in paradigmatic opposition to one another and contrast in respect to the evaluated polarity of the proposition. Thus negative interrogatives, polar interrogative tags, non-finite tags, WH polar interrogative tags and WH non-finite tags may all be grouped together as specific subtypes of interrogative mood in English. All invoke an interpretation of evidence in regard to the proposition expressed by the interrogative: apparently true (tagged varieties), or apparently false (negative variety). Together they constitute a subclass of interpretative interrogatives — interrogatives which are modalised.

The various tag constructions we have discussed in this paper contrast in terms of what Halliday 1985 dubs the interpersonal metafunction: they modalise the stem clause (see also Levinson 1983/1992:261). One of the characteristics of this type of meaning is that it is realised through the syntagmatic relations of the whole-whole type (McGregor 1990). As argued in McGregor 1995, the syntagmatic relationship involved in tag constructions is of this type. The two wholes are the entire tag construction, and the stem interrogative clause. These wholes are related in the same way as is the entire negative interrogative clause related to the interrogative clause within it. Just as in this construction the negative word contains the latter within its scope, so in the interrogative tag constructions, the tag contains the stem clause in its scope. (See McGregor 1995 for further discussion.)

## **9. Conclusions**

The four types of tags discussed in this paper each have a number of rather different, and in cases apparently contradictory or at least conflicting pragmatic functions. For the two most common of the interrogative tags, the range of pragmatic functions we have identified far exceeds the range of pragmatic functions identified for tags by most other investigators (e.g. Holmes 1986, 1990, 1992; Cameron, McAlinden and O'Leary 1990). Interrogative tags are also multifunctional in the sense that a given type may

serve two or more of these functions simultaneously (Cameron, McAlinden and O'Leary 1990, Munro 1993). Nevertheless, I have proposed that for each it is possible to identify a single invariant meaning, which remains constant throughout all of its uses. Doubtless there are many other different pragmatic functions that the interrogative tags can perform, and the functions identified here are but a select few which I simply happen to have observed. As more and more pragmatic functions are identified, the core meanings of the various tag constructions will no doubt need to be refined. I suggest, however, that my characterisations are on the right track.

This is a fascinating area for empirical and theoretical investigation. Grammatical investigations of tags have relied far too much on speaker's (i.e. the linguist's) intuitions, and too little on actual usage. Grammarians must expand their methodologies and interests to meet usage face to face. For their part, sociolinguists and pragmaticists must come to grips with the grammar of tags. One of the particular failures of these latter investigations is a tendency to lump together all types of tag (see e.g. Levinson 1983/1992: 47, 261, 298, 365). These contrast, however, not only in terms of their core meanings, but also in terms of their interactive uses. It is the different patterns of strategic usage of tags in distinct contexts, and according to speaker's social group membership, which constitute the most interesting issues for sociolinguistic and pragmatic investigation — not simply the frequency of usage of tags by members of social groups (see e.g. Holmes 1990, 1992 and Cameron, McAlinden and O'Leary 1990).

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*Ja hear that didja? Interrogative tags in Australian English*

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