Learning Puzzles with Indian English Tags

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Introduction

Second language learning (L2) is a unique and interesting domain of research. Most learners have an existing knowledge of one or more first languages (L1), which sometimes aids and sometimes hinders the acquisition of a new language. We present here, the case of Indian English question tags that seem to have been influenced by both 'standard' (American and British) English and Hindi-Urdu, and yet exhibit some unique features. Our primary contentions are, (a) Indian English has its own grammatical system, and (b) the learning of Indian English does not crucially rely on the learners' first language competence[1].

There are three ways of asking 'yes-no' questions in Indian English, as illustrated by the following examples. The first technique involves a high intonation over a declarative sentence that makes it a yes-no question. The second technique involves standard subject-auxiliary inversion [1] below. The third technique, unique to Indian English, places a question particle *na*/ *no* at the right periphery of a declarative sentence [2a]. We will henceforth refer to this question particle, which appears alongside the 'standard' or 'regular' tag question [2b] as the Indian English Tag.

1. Are you leaving?

2 a. You are leaving, na / no?

b. You are leaving, aren't you?

In this article, we will focus on Indian English tags [2a], and study its syntactic and semantic properties vis-à-vis similar questions in 'standard' English and Hindi-Urdu.

Comparison with Standard Tags

Tags in both varieties of English are generally used for confirming already known facts. In question [3], the speaker is confirming her knowledge of the event (*the boys are playing*). In the Indian English tag [2] also, the speaker does not expect any new information, since she is already aware of the answer.

3. The boys are playing, aren't they?

When it comes to structural properties, 'standard' tags and Indian English tags vary greatly (Akmajian, Demers, Farmer and Harnish, 2007). In 'standard' tags, the question tag is a statement followed by a mini question consisting of an auxiliary and a subject in an inverted word order. The tag in Indian English on the other hand, comprises a statement followed by a negative particle *no* / *na* (borrowed from Hindi-Urdu), and there is no overt realization of a subject or an auxiliary verb [4a]-[4b].

4a. You are going to the market, no / *are you no?

b. You enjoyed the movie, na / *did you no?

'Standard' tags can be either positive or negative and are in complementary distribution; contrast example [5a] with [5b].

5 a. John is threatening to leave, is he?
b. John is threatening to leave, isn't he?

Indian English tags however have a mandatory negative question particle [6a]. A positive particle, *haan* 'yes' yields unacceptability [6b].

6 a. They are dancing na?
b. *They are dancing, yes / haan?

'Standard' tags have obligatory auxiliary verbs in their second clauses, which morphologically agree with the main clause subjects as shown in [7].

7. He is going to school, isn't he?

Auxiliaries on the other hand are absent from Indian English tags, as can be seen from the infelicitous structures in [8a] and [8b].[2]

8a. *You are going, are no?
b. *The child is crying, is no?

In 'standard' tags, the pronouns in the mini-questions are required to have the phi-features (person, number and gender) of the matrix subject[3].

9. The boys are playing, aren't they / *he?

Once again, this structural property of 'standard' tags is absent from *na*/ *no* questions; the pronouns are obligatorily absent [10].

10. *The boys are playing, they no?

Standard tags can also be used as abbreviated forms in informal speech as shown in [11]; the subject and the auxiliary have been dropped in the main clause.

11. Been cheating all the time, haven't you?

Similar abbreviations are also possible in Indian English tags. Questions such as the one in [12] are acceptable without an overt subject and an auxiliary.

12. Been cheating all the time, no?

However, there are some constraints on the nature of the deleted subjects in such abbreviated forms. A structure such as the one in [13a] is permitted only when the deleted subject is understood as a second person pronominal. The main clause subject cannot be a first person pronoun, as illustrated by the unacceptable example [13b].[4]

13 a. Playing, no?
b. *We playing, no?

In 'standard' tags, the matrix subjects are deleted if and only if the auxiliary verbs are contracted onto them. In [14], 'you' and 'are'must be simultaneously deleted.

14. Getting pretty excited, aren't you?

Conversely, in Indian English tags, the matrix subjects are permitted to stand alone without the auxiliary as indicated in [15a]. However, the auxiliary must not appear without the subject as seen in [15b].

15 a. You (are) getting pretty excited, no?
b. *Are getting pretty excited, no?

Lastly, in 'standard' tags, modals cannot be deleted [16] and [17]. This feature is replicated by Indian English tags.

16. *~~Could~~ get on your nerves, couldn't it?
17. *~~Could~~ get on your nerves, no?

To summarize, we have demonstrated that although semantically similar, there are some crucial syntactic differences between 'standard' and Indian English tags. This indicates that Indian English has structures that are not found in its 'standard' variety.

Comparison with Hindi-Urdu Tags

In this section, we will investigate whether Indian English tags share any similarities with tags in Hindi-Urdu [18], which are mini-questions involving an auxiliary and a question particle.

18. Tumhe ye pasandhai, (hai) na?
You this like be, (be) no?
You like this, don't you?

The question particle can either be positive or negative. The positive tag is used for a force of challenge and the negative tag is used for request confirmation (example 19).

19. Tum khaanaa khaanaa chaahte ho, chaahte ho kyaa?
You food eat want be want be what?
You want to eat food, do you?

20. Tum khaanaa khaanaa chaahte ho, chaahte ho naa?
You food eat want be want be no?
You want to eat food, don't you?

These tags, optionally, have lexical verbs in their second clauses as shown in [21].

21. Tum kal ghar aaoge, aaoge naa?
You tomorrow home come-will come-will no?
You will come home tomorrow, won't you?

Moreover, the lexical verb is required to agree in phi-features (person, number and gender) with the matrix subject [22].

22. Tum kal mere ghar aaogi, aaogi / *aaoge naa?
You tomorrow my house come-will (fem) come-will (fem) / (mas) no?
You will come to my house tomorrow, won't you?

In Hindi-Urdu tags, the pronouns are obligatorily dropped [23].

23. *Ladkekhel-rahe-hain, ladke / vena?
Boys play-ing boys / they no?
The boys are playing, aren't they?

Hindi-Urdu tags can also be used as abbreviated forms in informal speech in which the subject can be deleted but not the auxiliary in the matrix clause [24].

24. Itne din se cheating karte aa-rahe-ho, naa?
Many days since cheating do been no?
Been cheating all the time, no?

Finally, modals cannot be contracted onto subjects and deleted from the main clause; their presence is mandatory [25].

25. Nas par char *(sakta) hai, hainaa?
Nerves on get *(could) be, be no?
Get on your nerves, couldn't he?

The properties of questions in 'standard' English tags, Hindi-Urdu tags, and Indian English tags have been summarized in Table 1.

It is clear from Table 1 that Indian English tags share some features with both 'standard' English and Hindi-Urdu tags. However, it also has features not found in either of these two varieties. This suggests that Indian English has a grammar, which is independent of both Hindi and Urdu, and is acquired through a learning

process that is not completely controlled by the speaker's L1 knowledge. It also proves that Indian English is not an aberration of a 'standard' variety, and should be considered as a language in its own right.

Acquisition Puzzles

With the structural properties of tags in place, we will now move on to an acquisition puzzle. As is well-known from the time of Chomsky (1981), L1 acquisition is assumed to be a fast, sub-conscious process, with the learner using her / his innate (universal) language learning principles, and fixing parameter values with reference to the linguistic input. L2 learning, however, is more contentious. Some researchers claim that the parameters of L1 are reset on learning L2. Others suggest that L2 settings are attainable without prior adoption of L1 settings (White, 2003); i.e., L1 interference in L2 learning is minimal. In the case of Indian English tags, the important question is whether the learner uses knowledge from Hindi-Urdu and 'standard' varieties of English in the construction of Indian English grammar. The problem is elaborated as follows:

As is well-known, Hindi-Urdu is an SOV (Subject-Object-Verb) language, and its question (Q) particles are generally placed at the sentence-final position [25].

25. tum aam khaate ho kyaa?
You mangoes eat be Q
Do you eat mangoes?

On the other hand, Indian English is an SVO language. Its questions have a question particle (an auxiliary, modal or a dummy *do*) at the left periphery [26], never at the right periphery [27].

	'Standard' English Tags	**Hindi-Urdu Tags**	**Indian English Tags**
Semantics	Yes	Yes	Yes
Positive / Negative tags	Yes	Yes (but different structure)	No
Overt realization of subject and auxiliary	Yes	Subject missing (pro drop language) and auxiliary optional	No
Presence of matrix verb in tags	No	Yes (optional)	No
Deleting subject and auxiliary in main clause with multiple auxiliaries	Yes (the first auxiliary deleted)	No (auxiliary not deleted, subject deleted)	Yes (the first auxiliary deleted)
Modals deleted with subjects in main clause	No	No	No
Deleting subject and the only auxiliary in matrix clause simultaneously	Yes	No (auxiliary not deleted)	No (Auxiliary verbs can be deleted , not the subject)

Table 1: Comparison of 'Standard' English, Hindi-Urdu and Indian English Tags

26. Do you eat mangoes?
27. *You eat mangoes, do / will / can?

Schematically, this can be represented as shown in [28]:

28. Will you (will) eat mangoes?

A learner who is learning any variety of English, on receiving this input, will set a value for the yes-no parameter, and conclude that all questions are formed by subject-auxiliary inversion. This rule is also extended to mini questions in tags of 'standard' English [29] and [30]:

29. He is not a genius, is he?
30. He loves mangoes, doesn't he?

This presents an acquisition problem. As a variety of 'standard' English, Indian English should have the same value for the yes-no question parameter. It should impose subject-auxiliary inversion as a rule in its grammar, and apply it to all questions. However, that cannot be the case, since some of the tag questions in the language have only negative particles in the mini-questions, and hence nothing to apply the rule to. This suggests that Indian English speakers have some extra rules over and above the 'standard' variety, which allows them to make 'standard variety' tags as well as 'Indian English' tags. Furthermore, the grammar underlying Indian English is not exactly that of the 'standard' language. Indian English parameters are given values independently of their values in the 'standard' variety.

Similarly, we can infer that the speaker's Hindi-Urdu knowledge does not interfere with the grammar formation of Indian English. If that were the case, the structure of Indian English tags would resemble that of Hindi-Urdu tags. The data discussed earlier however, suggests otherwise.

Conclusion

Through this paper, we have tried to establish that Indian English has tag questions that are structurally different from 'standard' English varieties as well as Hindi-Urdu. Therefore, while the *na / no* particle used in the tags could be a lexical borrowing from Hindi-Urdu, there is no evidence to suggest that Indian English is structurally equivalent to either of them. This comparative study also helps us establish that it is possible to learn a second language without much interference from 'standard' varieties.

References

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Endnotes

[1] By Indian English, we refer to its dialect spoken in the northern (Hindi-Urdu) belt. Other dialects may have different features. Existing work on Indian English include Bhatt and Mesthrie (2008), Sedlatschek (2009) and Lange (2012), among others.

[2] An anonymous reviewer suggests that the following sentence (i) is grammatical in Indian English. However, our informants find this structure completely unacceptable. We therefore assume this to reflect a dialectal variation in the language and put it aside for future research.
(i) He is so innocent, he is no?

[3] Some exceptions to this rule are listed below.
(i) There is a mosque in that street, isn't there?
(ii) There are some girls in your class, aren't there?

[4]A third person reading for the absent subject in such constructions is also not attested easily by native speakers of the language. A reviewer points out that given appropriate discourse / contexts, this reading may become available.

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