

Ask a linguist

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“Is English the only European language to have tag questions?”

Tag questions (also called ‘question tags’) are an interesting linguistic phenomenon. Technically, they are not originally questions, but rather statements which are turned into questions by adding something at the end. In English, for example, the statement ‘You like to read’ can be turned into a tag question by adding ‘don’t you?’ to the end: ‘You like to read, don’t you?’

We use tag questions for a number of reasons, for example to ask for the listener’s approval, assurance, agreement, or simply to make sure that they are still listening. They are often used for pragmatic reasons, without the expectation of a direct answer, for example to express irony or disappointment (‘You’re a great friend, aren’t you?’). The fact that they are not originally questions is also reflected in the fact that they often have a falling intonation pattern in English, i.e. we say them like statements rather than questions, for which our intonation would usually rise at the end.

In English, a question tag consists of an auxiliary verb (e.g. ‘do’, ‘be’, ‘have’, ‘will’) and a pronoun – as if you were asking if the sentence was true. If the verb in the sentence is positive, then the question tag will be negative (‘You like to read, don’t

you?’); if the verb in the sentence is negative, then the question tag will be positive (‘You don’t like to read, do you?’). Therefore, English tag questions are rather complex constructions. Sometimes we just add a simple word like ‘right?’ at the end of the sentence: ‘You like to read, right?’

Tag questions are very common across languages, and there are a number of different forms. Many languages use a word for ‘yes’ or ‘no’: French uses *non?* (‘no’) as in ‘Tu aimes lire, non?’ (‘You like to read, don’t you?’), and Russian uses *да?* (‘yes’). Other languages use a variant of ‘right?’ or ‘not true?’ or simply ‘or?’ In German, for example, you can use *nicht wahr?* (‘not true?’) or *oder?* (‘or?’), as in ‘Du liest gerne, oder?’, while a common question tag in Swedish is *eller hur?* (‘or how?’).

Then again, there are some languages that use a specific word to form a question tag. In colloquial French, for example, we have *hein?*, which can be added to the end of a sentence to turn it into a tag question – ‘Tu aimes lire, hein?’ In some southern German dialects, there is the word *gell?*, and the dialect spoken in the Berlin area has *wa?* These words are exclusively used to form tag questions.

As you can see, English is not the only European language

to have tag questions. In fact, tag questions are very common in many languages, and there are different ways of forming them. They are a very complex and fascinating linguistic phenomenon. ¶

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