

Tag questions in Meiteilon (Manipuri)

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1. In many languages, a terminal rising contour indicates a yes/no question, with or without other interrogative markers such as inversion of subject, or object, interrogative particles, etc. Information questions in all languages are marked with interrogative words while many yes/no questions are with special interrogative particles or affixes (Ullian 1978). In Meiteilon, an agglutinative and verb final language, the yes/no question is formed by suffixation of question markers *-ra~la* and *-dra~tra*¹ which agrees with Greenberg's Universal 9 (Greenberg 1963).²

¹ Question is formed by suffixation of question markers */-ra/ ~ /-la/*, */-dra/ ~ /-tra/* etc.

a) nəŋ yu thək-pra [-pə-ra-pra]
 you liquor drink
 "Do you drink liquor?"

b) nəŋ məhak-pu phu-bra [-bə+ra-bra]
 you he-accu. beat
 "Do you beat him?"

/-dra/ ~ /-tra/ is a question marker when it occurs with future marker */-gə-/ ~ /-kə-/*, as in sentence (c).

c) nəŋ cak ca-ge-dra
 you meal eat
 "Will you take your meal?"

Otherwise, */-dra/ ~ /-tra/* is combination of two morpheme */-tə/ ~ /-də/* "negative marker" and */-ra/ ~ /-la/* a "question marker". [*tə + ra - tra*], [*də + ra - dra*].

d) nəŋ yu thək-tra
 you liquor drink-q.mk
 "Don't you drink liquor?"

e) nəŋ məhak-pu phu-dra
 you he-accu. beat-neg.mk
 "Don't you beat him?"

² Universal 9 : With well more than chance frequency when question particles or affixes are specified in position by reference to the sentence as a whole, if initial, such elements are found in prepositional languages, and if final, in postpositional.

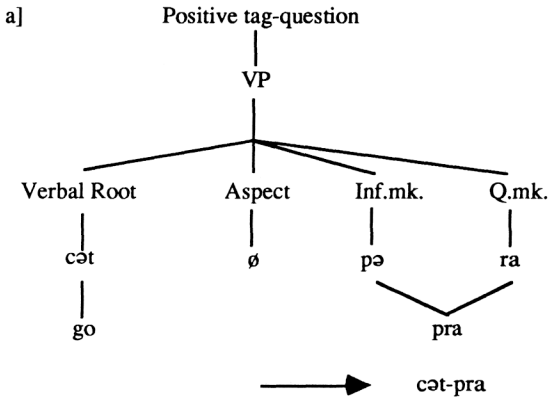
1.1 Tagged Declarative

There has been a good deal of discussion on tag sentences in transformational grammar (Klima 1964, Katz and Postal 1964, Bolinger 1967, Arbini 1969, Huddleston 1970, Schachter 1973, and Hudson 1975). The type of construction under consideration is exemplified by the following sentences of Meiteilon.

- 1.a. məhək yu thək-y, thək-tra
 he liquor drink-asp. drink-neg.Q.mk
 "He drinks liquor, doesn't he?"
- b. məhək yu thək-te, thək-pra
 he liquor drink-neg. drink-Q.mk
 "He does not drink liquor, does he?"
- 2.a. məhək yu thək-y, thək-pra
 he liquor drink-asp. drink-Q.mk
 "He drinks liquor, does he?"
- b. məhək yu thək-te, thək-tra
 he liquor drink-neg. dring-neg.Q.mk
 "He does not drink liquor, doesn't he?"

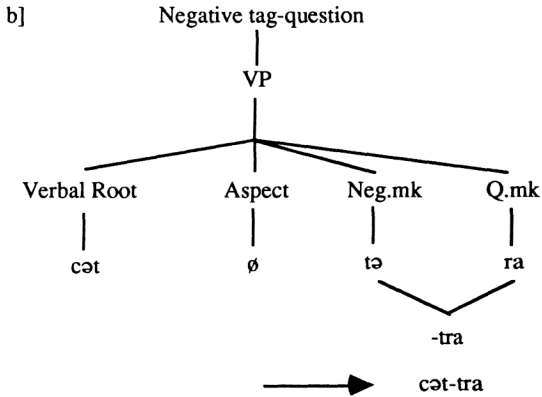
As far as the surface structure is concerned, it will presumably be conceded that the main constituent boundary is in each case marked by a comma, and that each of the major constituents belongs to the category "sentence". The two sentences (1) and (2) belong to different polarity tags. Sentence (1.a) and (b) belong to the "Reversed polarity tag" which is one whose negative-positive polarity is the reverse of that in the main sentence. Conversely a "constant polarity tag" has the same polarity as the main sentence (Huddleston, 1970:16) as sentence (2.a) and (b). Meiteilon has only the (2.a) type of "constant polarity tag", that is a positive one. But the (2.b) type of constant polarity tag is not found in tagged declaratives.

From the previous sentences, we can see how the tag-question is constructed.



In Meiteilon, a tag-question is constructed by the verb phrase only. A tag-question may be positive or negative

3. məhək kəyθel cət-te, cət-pra
 he market go-neg,mk go-Q.mk
 "He does not go to market, does he?"



4. məhak kəyθel cət-li cət-tra
 he market go-asp. go-neg.Q.mk
 "He goes to market, doesn't he?"

In Meiteilon, tag-questions cannot be regarded as optional variants of yes/no questions since they are semantically distinct from yes/no questions

- 5.a. ləy əsi phəjəy, phəjə-dra
 flower this nice nice-neg.Q.mk
 "This flower is nice, isn't it?"
- b. ma-nə thoybə-dəgi hennə waŋ-y, waŋ-dra
 he-nom Thoiba-from comp.pt. tall-asp. tall-neg.Q.mk
 "He is taller than Thoiba, isn't he?"

There are two meanings associated with these propositions. Semantically, one may say that the two reversed polarity tags do emphasize the proposition that "the flower is really nice" in sentence (5.a) and that "He is certainly taller than Thoiba" in sentence (5.b) and make it more precise. A second meaning is one in which it is also possible to say that the two reversed tags in (5.a) and (b) seek confirmation of the propositions from the addressee. The speakers expect only the positive reply from the addressee. The same is the case with the meaning of sentences (6.a) and (6.b).

- 6.a. ləy əsi phə jə-de, phəjə-bra [de neg.mk]
 flower This nice-neg.-mk nice-Q.mk
 "This flower is not nice, is it?"
- b. ma-nə thoybə-dəgi hennə waŋ-de, waŋ-bra
 he-nom Thoiba-from comp.pt tall- neg.mk tall-Q.mk
 "He is not taller than Thoiba, is he?"

The most commonly identified function of the reversed polarity tag is to obtain confirmation (Jespersen 1940) i.e., the speaker thinks the proposition is true, but wants the addressee to confirm it. But it is not necessary for the speaker to be uncertain about the truth of the proposition, as this definition implies (otherwise he wouldn't be asking for confirmation of it). The proposition can be analytically true, in which case the speaker must know for certain that it is true.

- 7.a. ucek paybə ɲəm-y ɲəm-dra
 bird fly can- can-neg. Q.mk
 "The birds can fly, can't they?"
- b. sən-nə turel-da iroy-be ɲəm-y, ɲəm-dra
 cow-nom river-in swim can- can-neg.Q.mk
 "The cows can swim in the river, can't they?"

In such examples, it is clear that the speaker is simply confirming that the addressee is taking account of the proposition in his current thinking about the matter in hand because it is in some sense relevant.

The discussion above leads to the question of the relationship between the meaning of ordinary interrogative and the meaning of a declarative with a tag question. Huddleston (1970) opposes the transformational analysis of Burt (1971: 8) saying that it is surely not true that the interrogative and the declarative with a tag question have the same meaning. Briefly, it can be said that in an interrogative sentence the speaker does not know whether the proposition is true. The speaker simply wants information from the addressee and he does not express his intention on the proposition (he does not take any side of the proposition). But in the declarative with a tag question, the speaker knows whether the proposition is true, and furthermore, he either wants confirmation or wants to give emphasis to the proposition (he expresses his intention). The following sentences will support these statements.

8. a. thoybi məsək phəjə-y, phəjə-bra
 Thoibi nice-asp. nice+Q.mk
 "Thoibi is nice, isn't she?"
- b. thoybi məsək phəjə-bra
 Thoibi nice-asp. nice+Q.mk
 "Isn't Thoibi nice?"
9. a. thoybi məsək-phəjə-de, phəjə-bra
 thoibi nice+neg.mk nice + Q.mk
 "Thoibi is not nice, is she?"
- b. thoybi məsək-phəjə-bra
 Thoibi nice+Q.mk
 "Is Thoibi nice?"

8(b) and 9.(b) are ordinary interrogatives, just looking for information whether "Thoibi is nice or not", nothing else. But 8.(a) and 9.(a) are declaratives with tag questions seeking confirmation or emphasizing the proposition that "Thoibi is or is not nice". Tags have the function of confirmation (Jespersen 1940:481). The function of tags in general seems to be simply that of showing that the speaker is not trying to tell the addressee anything, but rather is expressing shared beliefs (c.f. Cattell 1973:615 for a similar interpretation).

1.2 Tagged question word *nətra*

It is an interesting point that in this language there is a tag-question-word (T-word), i.e., *nətra* which is used commonly in discourse. Semantically, it is used "to obtain confirmation" and "to express shared beliefs". Syntactically it is used in both propositions (negative as well as positive) as in sentence (10) and (11) respectively.

10. məhak-nə ɲaŋbə-si tabə-də nuŋay-te, nətra
 he -nom speak-det hear-dat happy-neg. neg.Q.
 "It is not interesting to listen to him, isn't it?"

20. se thunə tum-mo, tum-khi-roy-dra
 quickly sleep-com. sleep-com-neg-Q.mk
 "Sleep quickly, won't you?"

These sentences are generally used with children. The morpheme *se* has no exact meaning, it is used with children generally. Two things can be mentioned here in relation to tagged declaratives. First, there is no question of constant tag. Secondly, there is no intention on the part of the speaker "to obtain confirmation" nor "to express shared beliefs" but only to make it imperative with a definite certainty (i.e. to make the addressee understand that it should be done without fail). This meaning is more apparent in prohibitives, as seen in the following sentences.

21. laŋ-nu, laŋ-khi-ge-ra/laŋ-khi-dra
 make-prohi -asp-asp-Q.Mk
 noise
 "Be quiet, won't you"
22. neŋ əsidə lak-kə-nu, lak-khi-dra
 you here come-asp.prohi come-asp.Q.mk
 "Don't come here, will you"
23. noŋ-də sanə-nu, sanə-khi-dra
 rain-loc play-prohi play-asp-Q.mk
 "Don't play in the rain, will you"
24. curup thək-kə-nu, thək-khi-dra
 cigarette drink-asp-prohi. drink-asp-Q.mk
 "Don't smoke, will you"

In the underlying meaning these sentences (21) to (24) have a deeper connotation which is not overtly apparent in the surface structure. An extra linguistic fact is involved here, that is a physical threat (beating of the addressee) has preceded the sentences. The situation is that the speaker (the mother) asks the addressee (her son) again and again to keep quiet. Still the child goes on making noise. At last she beats the child then says sentence (21). The same is the case with the remaining sentences (22 - 24).

When all the above sentences (17-24) are examined syntactically, they are all in reversed tag: the sentences (17-20) are positive while the tag-questions are negative. The propositions in sentences (21-24) are prohibitive and the tags are positive. But in very specific situations, constant-tag occurs, as in sentences (25) and (26).

25. laŋ-ŋu, laŋ-ŋu-dənə
 make noise make noise-comd.
 "make noise, (go on), won't you"
 (Let us see what you again)
26. caw, ca-kho-dənə
 eat eat-comd.
 "Eat, (go on) won't you"
 (Now you see what has happened)

Here also the action (of beating) the addressee (the child) precedes the sentences. The mother has already asked the child again and again not to make noise. But the child still continues. Then the mother beats the child and says the sentence *laŋ-ŋu, laŋ-ŋu-dənə* (25) "make noise" ironically instead of saying *laŋ-nu* "don't make noise" Regarding sentence (26), the mother asks the child not to eat because the curry is hot (spicy). But when the child starts eating, he then starts crying because it is spicy. Then the mother says "eat" and go on. Here the action is not involved because it is resultative.

But in other situations, there is no question of the action preceding what is happening in the above sentences (21-25). It is the same as the tagged declarative. Here are some examples.

27. lak-lo, lak-khi-roy-dra
come-com. come-asp-neg-Q.mk
"Come, won't you"
28. ca-ro, ca-khi-roy-dra
eat-com. eat-asp-neg-Q.mk
"Have it, won't you"
29. layrik-tu pa-ro, pa-khi-roy-dra
book-det. read-com. read-asp-neg-Q.mk
"Read the book, won't you"

As far as the meaning of tagged imperatives are concerned, there seems to be no problem in treating them in the same way as tagged declaratives. The main point about tagged imperatives being that they leave it to the addressee to decide what to do, which "softens" them from commands to invitations, requests, or the like. This is fully consistent with our analysis, in which the tag is used to show that the speaker thinks that the addressee (as well as the speaker) should decide whether the proposition is true. In this it is found that all the tag parts are syntactically interrogative except sentences (25) and (26).

2.2 Tag on Interrogative

When the tag occurs with an interrogative sentence the tag is in non-interrogative structure. It may be negative or it may be in positive, as in sentences (30 to 33).

30. nəŋ məhak-pu u-bra uy/u-de
you he-acc. see-Q.mk see-asp/see-neg.mk
"Did you see him, yes/no?"
31. nəŋ huranbə-du phabə ŋəm-gə-dra, ŋəm-gəni/ŋəm-loy
you thief-det arrest can-asp-Q.mk
"Can you arrest the thief, Yes/No?"
32. nəkhoy əŋka-du təwbə ŋəm-loy-dra, ŋəm-loy/ŋəm-geni
you (pl) problem-det solve can-neg.Q.mk
"Can't you solve the problem (arithmetic), Yes/no?"

33. nǎkhoy thǎbǎk-tu tǎw-roy-dra, tǎw-gǎni/tǎw-roy
 you (p1) work-det do-neg-Q.mk
 "Can't you do the work, Yes/No?"

Here an interesting point has come up, the tag can be constant or reversed. Another point is that both the positive and negative tag have occurred simultaneously. As far as meaning is concerned, it is just like Yes/No question. The speaker wants only a Yes/No answer, not further information. Furthermore, the speaker has no other intentions of making the addressee believe whether the proposition is true or false. It is also found that there is basically no difference in meaning between ordinary Yes/No questions and interrogatives with tags as in (30-33). But when the tag is in the imperative, the intention of the speaker is overtly expressed, as in sentences (34) and (35).

34. nǎkhoy hǎyey ǎykhoy-dǎ lakkǎ-dra, lak-u-ko
 you(p1) tomorrow we-loc. come-Q.mk come-com.
 "Will you come to my residence tomorrow, come (affectionately)
35. nǎy hǎyey layrik-tu purǎk-kǎ-dra, purǎk-u-ko
 you tomorrow book-det. bring-Q.mk bring-com.
 "Will you bring the book tomorrow, bring it (affectionately)

The intention of the speaker is that he wants the addressee to come without fail and the close relationship between the speaker and the addressee is also shown by the morpheme *ko*.

2.3 Tag with exclamative

Exclamatives can always be taken as reduced "exclamations", if tags are attached. Thus in (36), the tag *phǎjǎ-dra* or *nǎttra* can be given the same analysis as the full interrogative in (37).

36. ǎs! kǎyadǎ phǎjǎkhrǎbǎ lǎysabi-no, phǎjǎdra/nǎttra
 how nice girl-Q.be nice-Q.mk
 "Ah! how nice is this girl, isn't she"
37. lǎysabi-si phǎjǎ-bra
 "Is this girl nice?"

Exclamations like (36) differ in meaning from interrogative ones like (37), due to the fact that the latter is a question and therefore credits the addressee with as reliable a view as the speaker. Saying (37) implies that the addressee will agree, but saying (36) without the tag doesn't imply this.

3. Conclusion

We see that the tag part consists of only the verb excluding the subject. The tag provides additional meanings to the propositions - to obtain confirmation and/or

to "express shared beliefs". One interesting point found in this paper is that there is a tag question word which can be used in both positive and negative propositions.

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Received: 15 February 1995

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