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***“And your wedding is the twenty-second <> of June is it?”: Tag Questions
in Irish English¹***

Anne Barron

Abstract

This chapter addresses the lack of systematic research into the use of tag questions in Irish English on a formal and functional level by conducting an exploratory genre-specific analysis of tag questions in service encounters in Irish English. Tag question usage is compared with previous findings from reference corpora of Irish English, British English and American English. The study points to many similarities between tag questions across genre and variety

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but also shows features which appear particular to present day Irish English, such as the use of *sure*-tags, a higher frequency of the operator BE, a more frequent canonical use of “is it?” tag questions and a high use of interrogative anchors. In addition, the confirmation-eliciting function was employed particularly frequently in the canonical tag questions recorded in the service encounter data. Further research is required to investigate whether this findings was genre-related or variety-related. Finally, non-concordant tag uses were found to be uncommon, a finding which contrasts with previous research on Irish English. The paper closes with a plea for an increase in cross-variational analyses of tag questions.

1. Introduction

On a formal level, tag questions (TQs) in Irish English (IrE) share many similarities with TQs in British English (BrE) or American English (AmE) (cf. Hickey 2007: 276, 2008: 242). At the same time, a range of features, such as a frequent use of the tag *is it?*, a non-concordant use of the tags *is it?* and *isn't it?* and the use of *sure*-tags (e.g. *sure it doesn't*), have been reported to be characteristic of IrE (Hickey 2007: 276–277, 2008: 242–243; Lucek 2011: 103). In general, however, the study of particularly canonical TQs in IrE is

limited. Analyses have been restricted to the level of form, focusing on syntactic and semantic features in isolation without any regard to the functional level (cf., e.g., Hickey 2007, 2008; Kallen and Kirk 2012). In addition, genre-specific analyses of TQs in IrE are not available, nor indeed are such studies available for other varieties or languages. Finally, from a variational perspective, systematic contrastive analyses of TQs (particularly canonical TQs) in IrE – either genre-specific or genre non-specific, in comparison with other varieties of English, represent a desideratum. Indeed, the focus of variational research in English has predominantly focused on contrasts between BrE and AmE (cf. Algeo 1988, 1990; Tottie and Hoffmann 2006; Allerton 2009).

The present chapter addresses these research desiderata. It presents a formal and functional analysis of TQs in IrE in the particular context of service encounters. It focuses for the most part on canonical TQs but also addresses invariant *is it?* and *isn't it?* as well as *sure*-tags and compares findings to previous research on TQs in IrE, BrE and AmE. The data employed is a corpus of naturally-occurring service encounters (IrE retail corpus). Specifically, the research questions posed are the following:

- a. What canonical TQs are used in service encounters in IrE and what formal features do these have?

TAG QUESTIONS IN IRISH ENGLISH

- b. Are the invariant tags *is it?* and *isn't it?* and also *sure*-tags employed in the IrE retail corpus?
- c. What functions do the TQs identified serve within the context of a service encounter?
- d. Is the use of canonical TQs in the IrE service encounters comparable with the use of TQs identified in a non genre-specific reference corpus of IrE?
- e. How does the use of canonical TQs in the IrE service encounters compare with previous research on spoken non genre-specific discourse in BrE and AmE?

The chapter first provides a description of TQs. An overview of the research to date on TQs in IrE and on TQs in variational perspective follows. Attention then turns to the genre of service encounters, and subsequently to a description of the present naturally-occurring service encounter data. Following this, the findings of the service encounter corpus analysis are presented and compared with previous research. The chapter concludes with a discussion of findings and suggestions for further research.

2. Tag questions

2.1 Characterising tag questions

Two types of TQs are generally differentiated, namely canonical TQs, also termed “concordant mini clauses” (Allerton 2009: 310), and invariant TQs, also termed “invariable, non-concordant tag questions” (Allerton 2009: 310). Invariant TQs are utterance-final and non-concordant with the main clause to which they are attached. The tag *is it?* in example (1), for instance, does not mirror the verb *have* employed in the main clause. Neither is the pronoun *you* picked up in the tag. It is an example of an invariant tag.

(1) sales assistant: ... I think you have it <.> you have only one mixed **is it?**

(IrE retail corpus)

Canonical TQs, on the other hand, consist of two clauses, termed the anchor and the tag.² The tag, which consists of a pronominal subject and a finite non-lexical verb (an auxiliary verb / main verb *be* or *have*), is “anchored to”, i.e.

² Axelsson (2011: 29) notes that the term “tag question” has been employed differently in the literature, sometimes referring to the tag alone, other times referring to the combination of anchor and tag. Axelsson (2011) adopts the latter use. It is also the definition adopted in the present paper to ensure comparability in the functional analysis (cf. 5.2).

TAG QUESTIONS IN IRISH ENGLISH

dependent on, the anchor, itself a directly preceding or surrounding clause (cf. example (2)).³

(2) sales assistant: there was a g- heavy frost last night <.> **wasn't there**
customer: was there?

(IrE retail corpus)

The tag in example (2) is in final position relative to the anchor, with the anchor a clause directly preceding the tag. The tag is also in turn-final position. The anchor may be a declarative, an exclamation, an imperative or an interrogative, although declarative anchors, as in example (2), are by far the most common (cf. Axelsson 2011: 31).

The tag of a declarative, exclamative or interrogative anchor can be described as:

a string of words with inverted word order, consisting of an operator, a personal pronoun as subject (or existential *there*) and an optional enclitic negation *n't* (or a non-enclitic negation *not*), and expressing the same proposition as in a preceding (or surrounding) declarative, exclamative or interrogative anchor uttered by the same speaker and to which it relates

(Axelsson 2011: 30).⁴

³ The term “anchor” was introduced by Huddleston/Pullum (2002: 891) to make the relationship between the interrogative clause and the preceding or surrounding clause transparent. Cf. Wong (2007:44) on alternative terms.

To conclude this section, the question might reasonably be posed as to whether the inclusion of TQs in a volume on pragmatic markers (PMs) in IrE is at all justifiable. Are canonical tags PMs at all? This is a question which has been answered in various ways. The fact that the syntax of the anchor determines the form which canonical tags take casts some uncertainty on their status as PMs. However, as Andersen (2001: 21–23) with reference to Brinton’s (1996) description of PMs argues, canonical TQs “are short, recurrent, optional, multifunctional, informal, non-propositional, predominantly spoken, etc.” In addition, canonical tags exhibit a functional overlap with forms which are undisputedly agreed to be PMs (*they’re quite expensive eh?, right?, aren’t they?* (Andersen 2001: 22)). Indeed, as Andersen points out, the choice of a prototypical PM over a canonical tag in this example is due to stylistic reasons, production cost or regional variation. TQs, Andersen (2001: 23) thus contends, should be viewed as a subtype of PM, a view also shared by Fraser (1996: 177), who similarly classifies TQs as “hybrid basic markers”. This is the view adopted in the present chapter.

2.2 Tag questions in IrE

TQs in IrE have been reported to have many features in common with standard TQs used in BrE or AmE (cf. Hickey 2007: 276, 2008: 242). In IrE, reversed

polarity between anchor and tag (-/+, +/-) is most frequent, with +/+ polarity also found (cf. Hickey 2008: 242; cf. also section 2.3 for similar findings relating to AmE and BrE). Negative negative (-/-) polarity is infrequent, as in British and AmE (cf. section 2.3). In IrE, however, negative negative polarity is employed with *sure-tags* (cf. Hickey 2007: 276–277, 2008: 242), as, for example, in *God tishn't clothes weather, sure it's not?* (IrE retail corpus). A study of the SPICE-Ireland corpus (Systems of Pragmatic annotation in ICE-Ireland)⁶ conducted by Kallen and Kirk (2012: 110–115) shows BE tags to be the most frequently used tags (252) in IrE followed by DO tags (68)⁷, a finding in line with Tottie and Hoffmann's (2006) findings on BrE and AmE and Axelsson's (2011: 97) for BrE (cf. 2.3 below).

Hickey (2008: 242–243) points out that the tag *is it?* is frequently used in IrE, being found abundantly in textual records (cf. also Hickey 2007: 277). Hickey (2007, 2008) does not discuss canonical or invariant uses explicitly but the description and examples given reveal both canonical and invariant uses as well as uses with elliptical anchors. He claims the widespread use of *is it?* in IrE to contrast with a very low use of the tag in BrE as evidenced by a low use

⁶ ICE-Ireland is the Irish component of the International Corpus of English (cf. Kallen, and Kirk this volume).

⁷ It should be noted that the total DO tags in Table 43 in Kallen and Kirk (2012: 112) is given as 136. However, the correct total is 68. Table 43 erroneously adds the individual findings for each tag plus the total findings for each tag type.

of the form *is it?* in Shakespeare's plays, in the Helsinki corpus of English texts (modern section) and in the corpus of early English correspondence sample. The widespread use of *is it?* in IrE is explained with reference to the status of IrE as a contact variety (cf. Hickey 2007: 277, 2008: 243). Hickey (2008: 243) explains that this use derives from the canonical tag *an ea?* (is it?) in the Irish language (e.g. *Nil sé agat, an ea? = you don't have it, is it?)*) (cf. also Lucek 2011: 99).

An analysis of SPICE-Ireland also shows *is it?* to be a feature of present day IrE. Indeed, Kallen and Kirk (2012: 111) find *isn't it?* (76) and *is it?* (52) to be the two most frequent IS tag tokens used in IrE. Unfortunately, no information is given about whether these uses are canonical or invariant. The question of canonical or invariant use is, however, an important one in any analysis of IrE and one which should be systematically addressed. This is particularly so since research by Tottie and Hoffmann (2006: 296) found canonical *is it?* to be the second most popular tag form used in the British National Corpus demographic sample (BNC-SDM) (6%) (cf. also Tottie 2009: 358). Canonical uses of *is it?* thus appear to be present in both IrE and BrE. Invariant uses, in contrast, have been found to differ in BrE and IrE, as illustrated by Lucek (2011: 99). In a search of the face-to-face conversation text type in SPICE-Ireland, he found invariant use of *is it?* to be a feature of IrE (32 invariant uses) compared to findings from Columbus (2009) for invariant non-

concordant *is it?* in the British (1), Hong Kong (25), Indian (12), New Zealand (0) and Singapore (47), components of the International Corpus of English (ICE) corpora. (cf. however 5.1 for divergent findings). Cf. also Razali (1995) on invariant uses of *is it?* in Malaysian English.

The negative of the *is it?* tag, *is it not?* (from Irish *nach ea?* (not it?) and *nach bhfuil?* (not is it?)), on the other hand, does not appear to be a feature of today's IrE (nor indeed was it a feature of IrE in the 19th century; cf. Hickey 2008: 244). Indeed, Hickey (2008: 244) describes use of the form as “virtually unknown”. He suggests the lack of transfer to be due to different numbers of syllables between the Irish and English forms (syllable mismatch). While *an ea?* and *is it?* both have two syllables, *nach ea?* and *is it not?* have two and three syllables respectively. Also, Lucek (2011: 99) finds only two occurrences of the form in SPICE-Ireland, both from the same speaker in Northern Ireland. Kallen and Kirk's (2012: 111) overview of sentence tags with BE also based on the SPICE corpus coincides with this finding. A further common invariant non-concordant tag also related to the discussion of canonical tags is *isn't it?* in IrE. For Irish English, Lucek (2011: 103) reports invariant non-concordant *isn't it?* to appear 42 times in SPICE-Ireland (cf. however 5.1 for divergent findings). Similar to invariant *is it?*, invariant *isn't it?* is found in a number of varieties of English (cf. Mesthrie and Bhata 2008: 134 on its use in Indian English Columbus 2009 on its use in Indian English and Singapore English and Razali

(1995) on its use in Malaysian English). Productive use of the invariant non-concordant forms *isn't it?* and *is it?* has been suggested to be a contact phenomenon, the product of transfer from indigenous languages due to the fact that the tags in local native languages often take the form *is not?* These are then lexicalised in local varieties of English as *is it?* or *isn't it?* (cf. also Mesthrie and Bhata 2008: 134).

2.3 Canonical tag questions across varieties of English

A number of inter-varietal studies have been conducted in recent years focusing on invariant tags. Columbus (2010a) contrasts, for instance, the use of the invariant tags *yeah*, *no*, *na* and *eh* across New Zealand English, BrE and Indian English (cf. also Columbus 2010b). Also, Columbus (2009) deals with a range of invariant tags in BrE, New Zealand English, Indian English, Singapore English and Hong Kong English. As mentioned above, Lucek (2011) compares invariant tags in IrE with Columbus' (2009) work. In particular, the findings on the tags *is it?* and *isn't it?*, discussed above, are of interest for the present study.

Cross-variational analyses of canonical TQs have been conducted on the level of syntax, semantics and pragmatics. As will become evident from the following overview, much of this research has concentrated predominantly on contrasts of BrE and AmE. Generally, it appears that differences come in two

forms, as variety-specific differences on the one hand and as variety-preferential differences on the other hand, i.e. as a matter of preferences or quantitative differences in frequency of use. Of these, variety-preferential differences are more frequent (cf. Tottie 2009: 342). In the following, cross-variational research findings relating to the frequency of TQs and also to the polarity, operator, anchor and function of the TQs employed are presented.

Research suggests that the canonical tag is used to a larger extent in BrE than in AmE. Indeed, Tottie and Hoffmann (2006), in an analysis of canonical tags in BrE and AmE using the Longman Spoken American Corpus (LSAC) and the spoken component of the British National Corpus (BNC-S), found canonical tags to be used five times more frequently in BrE relative to AmE and nine times more frequently when the LSAC was compared to the BNC-SDEM (cf. also Allerton 2009: 322, Tottie and Hoffmann 2009: 354; cf. also Nässlin 1984).

As far as the polarity of the TQs are concerned, BrE and AmE have been found to share a preference for +/- polarity tag constructions (BNC-SDEM: 75%, LSAC: 69%) in Tottie and Hoffmann's (2006) study. However, AmE uses more -/+ and BrE more +/+ constructions. Furthermore, Allerton (2009: 321-322) suggests that reduced versions of constant polarity TQs (i.e. TQs involving ellipsis) are a feature associated with BrE and related varieties. In AmE, this feature, Allerton suggests, is rare.

Findings by Tottie and Hoffmann (2006) reveal that the preferred operator in both AmE and BrE is BE, at 50% in BrE and 46% in AmE. DO follows as the next most popular form (cf. also Axelsson's 2011: 97 for BrE). However, DO is employed to a much higher extent in AmE (41%) compared to 25% in BrE. The tag used most in both AmE and BrE in Tottie and Hoffmann's (2006) study, a study of canonical TQs only, was *isn't it? Is it?* was a further popular form in both varieties, being used 5% of the time in AmE and being the second most popular form in the BNC-S (6%) (cf. also Axelsson 2011: 228).

Concerning the structure taken by the anchor, Allerton (2009: 322) suggests that TQs with interrogative anchors are limited to BrE – or perhaps to a sub-variety of BrE. Tottie and Hoffmann (2006: 289) report briefly on the presence of interrogative anchors in their data but do not give any data on levels of occurrence and no differences between British and AmE are mentioned (cf. also Biber et al. 1999: 210). However, Axelsson (2011: 201, 208), in a study of a sub-corpus of fiction dialogue and spoken conversation, both from the BNC, finds no clear instances of interrogative anchors in her British data. It should be noted though that she applies strict criteria to interrogative tags, arguing that potential tags occurring after an interrogative anchor should not be classified as tags if they are uttered as a separate unit. In such cases, she contends, they are rather questions in their own right (cf. also Siertsema 1980). In Axelsson's (2011) view, interrogative TQs are rare in Standard English, if they even exist

at all. Like Allerton (2009: 322), she mentions, however, that interrogative TQs may be a feature of certain dialects. Indeed, Beal (1993), for instance, finds interrogative TQs to be used in Tyneside English. Also, Cattell (1973: 616) and McGregor (1995: 99) report that they are fully acceptable in Australian English. In general, classification of interrogative structures as TQs in studies of TQs would seem to be broader and more inclusive than in Axelsson (2011).

Further differences between BrE and AmE relate to the functions realised by TQs. Algeo (1990: 448-449) suggests, for instance, that peremptory tags and aggressive tags are used only in BrE. Here peremptory tags are understood as criticisms of the addressee via patronizing statements of universal truths that cannot be disagreed with and which function to change the topic (e.g. *well, it's all preparation, innit?*; cf. Algeo 1990: 446-449), while aggressive tags are assertions presented as if they should be known to the addressee (although this is impossible) with the aim of annoying the hearer and painting him/ her as lacking in intelligence (cf. Algeo 1990: 447; Tottie and Hoffmann 2006; cf. also Axelsson 2011: 166-167). With regard to the remaining functions, Tottie and Hoffmann (2006) report of similarities in the distribution of function, the confirmatory function (speaker unsure of truth of proposition and therefore requires confirmation), the facilitative function (employed to involve the listener despite the speaker being sure of the truth of the proposition), and the attitudinal function (emphasizes content of speaker's

utterance and does not demand a reply) being the most commonly found in both varieties. Facilitative tags were, however, more frequent in AmE than in BrE (cf. also Tottie 2009).

Although much of the variational research on TQs has been carried out between BrE and AmE, there is also a certain amount of research contrasting other varieties. Borlongan (2008) and Wong (2007) focus on TQs (canonical, but including invariant uses (e.g. invariant *is it?*)) in the Philippine and Hong Kong components of the International Corpus of English respectively. Borlongan (2008) finds TQs in Philippine English to be used to a smaller extent than in Hong Kong English, BrE or AmE (Tottie and Hoffmann 2006 and Wong 2007 being drawn on for a comparison of findings). The same polarity preferences are employed across these varieties. Also, *isn't it?* is recorded to be the tag used most in BrE (20.4%), AmE (18.6%) and Philippine English (41.3%). In contrast, Wong (2007) found *is it?* to be the most frequent tag used in Hong Kong English followed closely by *isn't it?* (*is it?*: 38.4%, *isn't it?*: 31.6%). On the level of function, the attitudinal function was recorded to a higher extent in Philippine English and in Hong Kong English relative to British or AmE. The facilitative function was comparatively less prominent in Philippine English than in British or American English. Having presented research on TQs in IrE as well as in several other varieties of English, I now turn to the genre under investigation in the present chapter.

3. Service encounters

Service encounters may be defined as “everyday interactions between the customer and the server whereby some commodity (information or goods) will be exchanged.” (Ventola 2005: 19). They are frequently “front stage” dialogical activities, involving dialogue with the general public (Koester 2010: 14, 30). In such interactions, as Merritt (1976: 321) points out, customers have particular service needs which it is in the seller’s interest to meet.

Many different types of service encounters have been recognised to exist within the broad genre of the service encounter, some based on spatial concerns (e.g. market interactions vs. shop interactions vs. call centers), others based on the commodity being sold (travel agent encounters/hairdresser encounters/small shop encounters/supermarkets/bookshops/hotel receptions/bar encounters) or the participant roles (client/customer; server/assistant) (cf. Mitchell 1957/1975; Coupland 1983; Cileberti 1988; Schneider 1988; Placencia and Mancera Rueda 2011). Despite this diversity of type – and frequently also correspondingly of structure (cf. Mitchell 1957/ 1975; McCarthy 2000: 85; Koester 2010: 30-31) – service encounters irrespective of type have much in common. On the contextual level, they share firstly the interaction of a service

provider and a customer and secondly the performance of a service, whether providing information or a material good. Thus, they encompass a transactional function, also termed “business- or task-oriented talk”, concerned with getting a particular job done (cf. McCarthy 2000: 84). In addition, as Koester (2004: 1406), among others, points out, “workplace discourse is not always task-focused, and also displays speakers’ attention to relational concerns” (cf. also McCarthy 2000). The amount of relational talk will depend on the particular encounter at hand and may range from simple phatic exchanges taking the form of greetings and leave-takings to encounters, such as hairdresser interactions, in which small talk forms a key element of the discourse (cf. Koester 2004, 2010: 31-32; cf. also McCarthy 2000). A useful differentiation in this context is that made by Bailey (1997: 333) between socially minimal service encounters and socially expanded service encounters. Socially minimal encounters are predominantly transactional, including only openings, negotiations of the exchange and closings; socially expanded service encounters are more strongly relational and include also interaction on interpersonal topics.

4. Retail corpus

The analysis is based on a small-scale specialised corpus of IrE retail data composed of 29,000 words (thirty-two interactions). It was recorded by the

present author in 2002 in a second-hand boutique/bridal boutique in the South East of the Republic of Ireland. All interactions involve the proprietor, a female aged approximately 60 years of age at the time of recording. She was from the South of Ireland and at that time had lived in the South East of Ireland for twenty-two years. Both socially expanded and socially minimal encounters are present in the data (cf. Bailey 1997: 333) as the customers ranged from those known well to the proprietor also in contexts outside of the service encounters, to those known well but only in the context of the business, to those unknown to the proprietor. Transactional talk centered around sales talk on the one hand and on the other hand around organizational matters (selling clothes, pricing clothes brought in by customers to be sold, paying out customers for clothes already sold). Interactions were audio-recorded at the sales desk. The proprietor knew in advance that the recordings were taking place. A note was clearly displayed to make customers aware of the recordings taking place. The recordings were then transcribed.⁸

TQs were searched for electronically on the basis of a) the list of tags found in SPICE-Ireland (cf. Kallen and Kirk 2012: 110–113) and b) the list of tags provided by Axelsson (2011: 39). A total of 68 canonical tags were

⁸ Transcription was conducted at the University of Bonn. I am grateful to Klaus P. Schneider for access to these transcripts.

identified, 80.9% (55) produced by the proprietor, the remaining 19.1% (13) by the customers as well as small number of invariant tags and *sure*-tags (cf. 5.3). The TQs were coded using MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis tool. The actual recordings were also checked for intonation where the context offered insufficient information for the coding of function. Indeed, access to the original recordings was a particular advantage of the data employed as most analyses of TQs to date using corpora have had to rely exclusively on context in the absence of information on intonation. A further advantage of the specialised corpus was the information available on the exact context of use and communicative function (cf. also Clancy 2011 on the advantages of analyses using small-scale corpora). Of course, the presence of a single proprietor in the role of sales assistant is a disadvantage of the present data, possible idiolectal features influencing the data analysis. The categorisation by function followed on the basis of a combination of content, propositional content and hearer uptake (cf. Barron 2011, forthcoming). Categorisations were conducted by the present researcher and a trained research assistant.

5. Findings

5.1 Tag question: Issues of form

In the present section, the analysis of form relates solely to canonical tags. *Sure*-tags and invariant *isn't it?* and *is it?* are dealt with below (cf. 5.3) to ensure comparability with previous research which focuses only on canonical tags. The formal analysis concentrates on the tag itself (operator, form taken) and the anchor (sentence structure, polarity, ellipsis). We turn first to the tags used.

Of the total number of canonical tags identified, BE is the most frequently occurring operator at 66.2% (45) (cf. Table 1), as also found by Tottie and Hoffmann (2006: 291) for BrE and AmE (BrE: 49%, AmE: 46%; cf. also Axelsson (2011: 97) for similar findings (52.5% (691) for everyday conversation) (cf. Table 2). However, a comparison with the reference corpora reported on in Tottie and Hoffmann (2006) reveals that the higher use of BE in the Irish data was statistically significant at the 99.5% level for the American data (Chi-square with Yates correction, $p=0.0017$) and at the 95% level for the British data (Chi-square with Yates correction, $p=0.0088$). In contrast, a comparison with SPICE-Ireland reveals no statistical significance (Chi-square with Yates correction, $p=0.7421$), suggesting a higher use of BE in IrE in general and thus pointing to a possible variety-specific difference rather than a genre-specific difference for the service encounters at hand. DO was the next most frequently used modal at 17.6% in the Irish service encounters (cf. Table 1), also in line with findings by Tottie and Hoffmann (2006). However, the

frequencies of DO here resemble Tottie and Hoffmann's (2006) British data (25%) rather than their American data (41%).

Table 1. Verb taken in operator of tag questions (n=68)

| HAVE tags | DO tags | MODAL tags | BE tags |
|-----------|------------|------------|------------|
| 5.9% (4) | 17.6% (12) | 10.3% (7) | 66.2% (45) |

Table 2. Comparison of use of BE tags across varieties of English†

| | IrE retail corpus (n=68) | SPICE-Ireland (n=367† † (based on Kallen&Kirk 2012) | BNC-SDEM (n=3724) (Tottie&Hoffmann 2006)+ | LSAC (n=2311) (Tottie&Hoffmann 2006) |
|----|-----------------------------|--|---|---|
| BE | 66.2% (45) | 63.2% (232) | 49% (1840) | 46% (1067) |

† It should be noted here that the reference corpora in Table 2 focus on different data sources. Whereas the figures for SPICE-Ireland are based on spoken and written data (cf. Kallen and Kirk 2012: 9), the BNC-SDEM and LSAC encompass spontaneous conversation only.

†† The figures for Kallen and Kirk's (2012) analysis of SPICE-Ireland are difficult to compare given the inclusion of invariant tags and the different systems of categorisation. Their figures for variable tags are based not only on canonical tags but rather include also *sure*-tags, *so*-tags and a range of further variable tags including, for instance, *you know* tags. The total given here was calculated by adding only the BE, HAVE, DO and modal tag totals. Here it should be noted that the total of 68 DO tags and 45 modal tags was used here rather than the incorrect figure of 88 given in Table 44 of Kallen and Kirk (2012: 112). From this overall total of 388 tags were then subtracted the figures for invariant tags in ICE-Ireland recorded by the present researcher in an analysis of the complete SPICE corpus (cf. 5.3 below) [total: 21] re. The total BE figure is given by excluding the 20 invariant uses of BE tags recorded in the present analysis of SPICE-Ireland (cf. 5.3) from the total of 252 BE tags given in Kallen and Kirk (2012: 111) (cf. Table 3).

+ The totals for the BNC-SDEM and LSAC are taken from comparative findings given by Tottie and Hoffmann (2006: 291) which exclude invariant uses.

Overall, 25 different canonical tags were employed in the corpus excluding the *sure*-tags discussed below. This number is much smaller than those reported on in analyses of general reference corpora, Tottie and Hoffmann (2006: 296), for instance, found 200 different combinations. However, most combinations in these larger databases, similar to the present data, occur in very low proportions. The tag *isn't it?* represents an exception in the BNC and also in the LSAC, occurring in 18.6% of TQs in the LSAC and in 20.4% of TQs in the BNC-SDEM (cf. Table 3).⁹ In the present corpus, the tag *isn't it?* is also used frequently, representing 33.8% (23) of all canonical TQs employed (cf. Table 3). The differences between the use of *isn't it?* in the present corpus and in the remaining corpora are statistically significant for AmE (LSAC corpus) (Chi-square with Yates correction, $p=0.0027$), for BrE (Chi-square with Yates correction, $p= 0.0106$) and also for SPICE-Ireland (Chi-square with Yates correction, $p= 0.0119$). This latter finding suggests that the higher use of *isn't*

⁹ It should be noted that approximately half of the instances of *isn't it?* in the BNC included occurrences of *innit?* which were not clearly invariant. Several authors have noted the increasing use in recent years of the invariant tag *innit?* (cf., for instance, Kruger 1998 and Stenstrom et al. 2002 on the increasing use of the invariant tag *innit?*). In cases where *innit?* or indeed *is it?* or *isn't it?* accompany the verb *is* and an appropriate NP in the anchor clause, they are treated as canonical uses in line with Tottie and Hoffmann (2006: 286). However, theoretically, use may actually be invariant. However, this possibility also applies to apparently canonical TQs uses of *is it?* and *isn't it?*.

it? in the retail corpus does not appear to be a feature of IrE in general but rather a feature of the retail corpus.

Table 3. Comparison of *isn't it?* and *is it?* across four corpora of the varieties of English

| | Retail corpus of IrE (n=68) | SPICE- Ireland (n=367)* (Kallen and Kirk 2012)** | BNC- SDEM‡ (n=3724) (Tottie and Hoffmann 2006) | LSAC (n=2311) (Tottie and Hoffmann 2006) | ICE-PHI*** (n=46) (Borlongan 2008) |
|------------------|--------------------------------------|---|---|--|---|
| <i>isn't it?</i> | 33.8% (23) | 19.3% (71) + | 20.4% (760) | 18.6% (429) | 41.3% (19) |
| <i>is it?</i> | 17.6% (12) | 12% (44) | 6.1% (227) | 5% (115) | 17.4% (8) |

* cf. note †† in Table 2 on the calculation of the SPICE-Ireland totals.

** Unfortunately, it is unclear from Kallen and Kirk (2012) whether these uses are all canonical or not. Invariant forms may also be included. Hence, the figures for invariant and canonical use are based on a supplementary analysis of the SPICE-corpus, in which five invariant *isn't it?* tags were found and seven invariant *is it?* tags.

† This total number of canonical tags is taken as the same as in Kallen and Kirk's (2012) analysis of SPICE-Ireland.

*** Borlongan's (2010) findings are based on all spoken components of ICE-PHI. Cf. Table 2 for details of the data underlying the other corpora.

‡ Percentages are based on proportional distribution in two subsets of 1,000 words from the BNC-SDEM and LSAC.

+ The figure of 760 *isn't it?* tags includes 319 instances of *innit* whose use was not clearly invariant (Tottie and Hoffmann 2006: 296). Cf. also above.

TAG QUESTIONS IN IRISH ENGLISH

The tag *is it?* is the second most frequent tag recorded in the present data, occurring in 17.6% (12) of the TQs identified (cf. Table 3). Ten of the twelve instances of *is it?* which occur have a declarative anchor, the remaining two having an interrogative anchor. Frequent use of *is it?* was also found by Tottie and Hoffmann (2006). In their study, *is it?* was the second most frequent tag in the BNC-SDEM at 6.1% (cf. also Axelsson 2011: 228) (cf. Table 3). Use in the LSAC was similar at 5% (rank 4). Nonetheless, use in the IrE retail corpus is high relative to these varieties and also relative to other tags used in the Irish service encounters. Indeed, a comparison of this Irish use of *is it?* with the British and American data shows the differences to be statistically significant (Chi-square with Yates correction, BrE: $p= 0.0003$, AmE: $p= 0.0001$). The retail data are reminiscent in this feature of Borlongan's (2008) data for Philippine English (17.4% (8) of the tags found in the ICE-PHI corpus) although her analysis does not clarify whether all uses are canonical uses. A comparison between the canonical uses in SPICE-Ireland and the present retail data is not statistically significant (Chi-square with Yates correction, $p= 0.2790$), pointing to a possibly variety-specific rather than genre-specific feature. Interestingly, a comparison of the SPICE-Ireland data and the British and American corpora also reveals statistically significant differences in the use of *is it?* (BrE: $p<0.0001$, AmE: $p<0.0001$) This lends support to previous

discussions on the status of *is it?* as a feature of IrE (cf. Hickey 2007, 2008, cf. also 2.2) and clarifies that its higher use is as a canonical form (cf. 5.3 below on invariant *is it?*)

A further interesting tag in the present database is the form *is it not?* with non-enclitic negation, the negative of the *is it?* tag. This form is not listed in Tottie and Hoffmann's (2006: 296) as one of most frequent fifteen tags. Neither does Axelsson (2011: 225), using the same demographic component of the BNC, find any occurrences although three occurrences out of 1066 are recorded in her fiction sub-corpus of the BNC. The present data support previous findings regarding its limited use in IrE (Hickey 2008: 244; Lucek 2011: 99).¹⁰

Concerning the anchor, it was found that the vast majority of the 68 canonical tags in the retail corpus had a declarative anchor (89.7% (61)).

Table 4. Distribution of sentence structure in canonical tag questions in IrE
retail corpus

¹⁰ Research by Borlongan (2008: 13) suggested the uncontracted form of the tag *isn't it?* – i.e. *is it not?* – to be stylistically-marked. She found five of six occurrences of *is it not?* to occur in the genre of legal cross-examination.

TAG QUESTIONS IN IRISH ENGLISH

| | (n=68) |
|---------------|------------|
| Declarative | 89.7% (61) |
| Interrogative | 10.3% (7) |
| Exclamative | - |
| Imperative | - |

This is a finding which is also in line with previous research on BrE (cf., e.g., Axelsson 2011: 31). Interrogative anchors, as in example (6), were also employed in the retail corpus.¹¹

(6) sales assistant: <[>is it </[> just two girls Nora has <.> **is it?**
customer: that's all <.> yeah <.> and three boys
sales assistant: oh she's three boys

(IrE retail corpus)

The presence of interrogative anchors in the corpus is rather high at 10.3% (7) (cf. Table 4), and may as such lend support to the status of interrogative anchors as a dialectal feature alongside Tyneside English and Australian English (cf. Cattell 1973, Beal 1993, McGregor 1995). Further research is required to address this question.

¹¹ As discussed in 2.3, the status of interrogative tags and indeed also of its categorisation is controversial. In the present context, interrogative tag constructions were coded as such without attention as to whether the tags were uttered as a separate unit.

The majority of the TQs in the retail corpus were of positive-negative (+/-) polarity (60% (41) (cf. Table 5)). This supports previous findings for BrE and AmE (cf., e.g., Tottie and Hoffmann 2006: 290). Also, taken together, the reversed polarity tags (+/-, -/+) amount to 67% (46) of the TQs identified. As such, the findings support earlier findings by, e.g., Tottie and Hoffmann (2006); Hickey (2008: 242); Allerton (2009: 310) and Axelsson (2011: 33) concerning the general high use of reversed polarity tags in English. Negative/negative polarity tags were not found, also in line with previous research which underlines their low occurrence in English (cf. Tottie and Hoffmann 2006: 290). The relatively high frequency of +/+ polarity TQs in the Irish corpus (32% (22) compared to 8% in the BNC-SDEM and 4% in the LSAC is, however, rather significant. Even though realisations varied, there was a clear preference for +/+ polarity tags to take the tag *is it?* (54.5% (12)) (cf. Table 6).

Table 5. Polarity of canonical tag questions in IrE retail corpus

| | IrE retail corpus (n=68) | BNC-SDEM (n=3724) Tottie/Hoffmann (2006) | LSAC (n=2311) (Tottie/Hoffmann 2006) |
|-----|--------------------------|---|---|
| -/+ | 7% (5) | 17% | 27% |
| +/+ | 32% (22) | 8% | 4% |
| +/- | 60% (41) | 75% | 69% |
| -/- | - | minimal | - |

TAG QUESTIONS IN IRISH ENGLISH

Table 6. Tags employed in +/+ tag questions in IrE retail corpus

| | (n=22) | | | | | | | |
|-----|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|--------|---------|---------|
| | is it | have I | do you | was it | did I | will I | did you | did she |
| pos | 54.5% | 9.1% | 9.1% | 9.1% | 4.5% | 4.5% | 4.5% | 4.5% |
| pos | (12) | (2) | (2) | (2) | (1) | (1) | (1) | (1) |

The data were also analysed for the presence of ellipsis (i.e. an elliptical subject and/or auxiliary). As many as 29.4% (20) of the TQs had an elliptical anchor as seen in example (7) (cf. Table 7). The underlying anchor and tag in example (7) can be suggested to be *(It is) nine-fifty, is it?* Indeed, of the total elliptical TQs, 50% (10) were constant positive/ positive (+/+) polarity tags (cf. Table 8), as in example (7). Overall then, reduced constant polarity TQs made up 14.7% (10) of the overall canonical TQs identified. Allerton (2009: 321-322) suggests such TQs to be associated with BrE and related varieties rather than with AmE (cf. 2.3). In this point then, the IrE data are closer to BrE.

(7) sales assistant: so how much is that Joe? nine-fifty **is it** or something

(IrE retail corpus)

Table 7. Distribution of elliptical/ non-elliptical canonical tag questions in IrE retail corpus

(n=68)

| | |
|----------------|------------|
| elliptical | 29.4% (20) |
| non-elliptical | 70.6% (48) |

Table 8. Polarity of canonical elliptical tag questions in IrE retail corpus

| | Retail corpus (n=20) |
|--------------------|----------------------|
| Positive/ negative | 50% (10) |
| Positive/positive | 50% (10) |
| Negative/positive | - |
| Negative/ negative | - |

We leave the study of the formal features of the TQs under investigation to turn to the functional analysis. Here too, however, many of the formal features highlighted will be investigated in more detail.

5.2 Tag questions: Issues of function

The categorisation scheme employed in the present analysis is based broadly on Axelsson's (2011) categorization system of canonical TQs, itself developed with reference to other categorisations, such as those put forward by Holmes (1995), Algeo (1990), Tottie and Hoffmann (2006) and Tottie and Hoffmann (2009) (cf. Axelsson 2011: 41–58 for a detailed overview of the different

TAG QUESTIONS IN IRISH ENGLISH

schemes). Table 9 illustrates the functions identified and the corresponding frequencies of occurrence for each function. The findings for the retail corpus are compared to Axelsson's (2011) findings for the spoken demographic component of the BNC given comparability with her categories. The functions themselves are detailed in the following. The unit of analysis is the tag question since, as Axelsson (2011: 57) states, "there is no tag without an anchor, and no anchor without a tag". In other words, the meaning of the tag and that of the tag question are intricately linked and thus frequently difficult to separate (cf. Holmes 1982: 45, 47).

Table 9. Canonical tag questions by function in the IrE retail corpus compared to Axelsson's (2011) analysis of the BNC-SDEM

| | Irish retail corpus (n=68) | BNC-SDEM (Axelsson 2011: 134) (n=250)* |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| Confirmation-eliciting | 48.5% (33) | 24.4% (61) |
| Speaker-centered rhetorical | 41.2% (28) | 52.8% (132) |
| Addressee-centered | - | 22.8% (57) |
| Conversation initiating | 8.8% (6) | - |
| Requests/ suggestions | 1.5% (1) | - |

* Axelsson (2011: 7) coded a random sample of 250 TQs of over a thousand TQs found in the corpus.

5.2.1 Confirmation-eliciting tag questions

The macro-category confirmation-eliciting TQs, adopted from Axelsson (2011), consists of TQs which share a greater or lesser amount of speaker uncertainty with regard to the truth of the proposition in the anchor. They appeal to the hearer for confirmation and are sometimes open to refutation (cf. Axelsson 2011: 72-73 on the difference between confirmation-seeking and confirmation-demanding TQs).. In example (8), for instance, the sales assistant is checking that the customer's name is Farrell and not O'Farrell, also a common name in South East Ireland. She appeals to the hearer for certainty as to the truth of the proposition. In the present context, this category also includes TQs which demand hearer confirmation while also communicating surprise at information received. Example (9) is a case in point. Here the sales assistant is surprised at the customer categorising a particular garment as a dress rather than a jacket and looks for confirmation.

- (8) sales assistant: what name is it again <[> Daphne? </[>
 customer: <[>ah <[><.> Farrell
 sales assistant: Farrell <.> not O <.> F <.> **is it?**
 customer: no <.> just Farrell

(IrE retail corpus)

TAG QUESTIONS IN IRISH ENGLISH

- (9) sales assistant: <[>a denim dress </[> **is it** <.> I have it down as as a jacket
customer 3: no, would you believe that's actually a dréss
sales assistant: is it? [*laughing*]

(*IrE retail corpus*)

The confirmation-eliciting category is similar to Tottie and Hoffmann's (2006) informational (speaker requests unknown information) and confirmatory tags (speaker unsure of truth of proposition, requests confirmation) merged. Tottie and Hoffmann (2006) found these tags to account for 41% (152) of the TQs in the BNC-SDEM compared to 34% (169) in the LSAC. Axelsson (2011: 134, 240) reports of a total of 24.4% (61) confirmation-eliciting TQs in the BNC-SDEM. Confirmation-eliciting TQs were employed in the retail corpus (48.5% (33)) to a significantly higher degree than in Axelsson's (2011) BNC data (24.4% (61)) (Chi-square with Yates correction, $p < 0.0001$) (cf. Table 9). Table 10 provides an insight into operator use in realisations of the confirmation-eliciting function. Here it becomes apparent that the operator BE is employed frequently, as indeed is the case in the remaining functions also. Particularly noteworthy, however, is the fact that as many as 63.1% (12) of the confirmation-eliciting TQs realised using the operator BE used the tag *is it?* Indeed, all uses of *is it?* in the present corpus are confirmation-eliciting in nature. The higher frequency of the confirmation-eliciting function in the retail

corpus compared to Axelsson’s (2011) analysis of the BNC would suggest that the high use of this function may be related to the specific context of the service encounter. However, further functional research on a reference corpus of IrE is required to confirm this particularly given the higher use of *is it?* in Irish English relative to other varieties (cf. Barron et al. forthcoming on this question)..

Table 10. Operator use by function in IrE retail corpus

| | Confirmation-eliciting (n=33) | Conversations-initiating (n=6) | Speaker centered (n=28) | Requests (n=1) |
|-----------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------|
| DO | 21.2% (7) | 33.3% (2) | 10.7% (3) | - |
| MODAL | 12.1% (4) | | 10.7% (3) | - |
| BE | 57.6% (19) | 66.7% (4) | 78.6% (22) | - |
| is it | 63.1% (12) | - | - | - |
| isn't it | 15.8% (3) | 75% (3) | 77.3% (17) | - |
| isn't she | - | - | 9.1% (2) | - |

TAG QUESTIONS IN IRISH ENGLISH

| | | | | |
|-----------|-----------|---------|-------|---|
| was it | 10.5% (2) | - | - | - |
| | | - | 13.6% | - |
| wasn't it | 5.3% (1) | | (3) | |
| is it not | 5.3% (1) | - | - | - |
| wasn't | | 25% (1) | - | - |
| there | - | | | |
| HAVE | 9.1% (3) | - | - | 1 |

5.2.2 Speaker-centered rhetorical questions

Speaker-centered rhetorical questions is a category introduced by Axelsson (2011: 81). This category includes primarily speaker-centered TQs employed in communicating speaker's assessments or opinions or beliefs, as in example (10) and is thus reminiscent of the attitudinal category put forward by Tottie and Hoffmann (2006). In this example, the co-occurrence of the pragmatic marker "you know" in the TQ underlines its status as a speaker-oriented rhetorical question (cf. Axelsson 2011:78). In contrast to the confirmation-eliciting TQ type, the hearer is not assumed to possess more knowledge than the speaker. Responses are not necessary but do occur, reinforcing, qualifying or canceling an assumption or proposition in the anchor (cf. Axelsson 2011: 75-81).

(cf. Table 9). Any differences between the two corpora were not statistically significant.

The realisation of the speaker-centered TQs in the present corpus throws some light on the high use of *isn't it?* in the corpus. As many as 60.7% (22) of the total speaker-oriented rhetorical tags were realised using this form (cf. Table 10). Further research is needed to investigate the status of the relationship between this form and function also in other varieties.

5.2.3 *Conversation-initiating*

Conversation-initiating TQs, also from Axelsson (2011: 69, 74), are TQs “used primarily to start a conversation or restart a conversation on a new topic”. In example (12), for instance, a previous customer has just left and the sales assistant tries to initiate a conversation with customer by first remarking on the weather the day before (*wasn't yesterday a fabulous day?*) When customer's response is followed only by a brief response, followed by a longer pause, the sales assistant tries again to start a conversation, remarking *there was a g-heavy frost last night, wasn't there*. This time the initiation is more successful and an interchange about the cold frost during the night proceeds.

- (12) sales assistant: wasn't yesterday a fabulous day?
- customer: xxx exactly xxx <...>
- sales assistant: there was a g- heavy frost last night **wasn't there**
- customer: was there?
- sales assistant: yeah the place was white this morning when I got up
- customer: was it? <.> what time?

There is some overlap between the speaker-centered rhetorical TQ category and this category. However, Axelsson (2011: 74) points out that in contrast to speaker-centered rhetorical TQs, a hearer response, whether confirmatory or not, is essential for conversation-initiating TQs. They function to initiate a dialogue. Axelsson (2011: 134, 240) reports no conversation-initiating TQs in the BNC-SDEM. A total of 3.6% (9) are found in the fiction sub-corpus analysed. As seen in Table 9, conversation initiating tags are employed in the Irish retail corpus but their use at 8.8% (6) is much lower than the confirmation-eliciting and speaker-centered rhetorical TQs. They are used exclusively by the proprietor who, responsible for and also dependent on the success of the interaction, uses them to create a social bond.

5.2.4 Requests

TQs used to request a particular good or service, as in example (5) above, are relatively infrequent when compared to the other categories. Axelsson's (2011:87, 134) exchanging goods and services category is broader encompassing requests and offers. The tag functions to downgrade or soften the request. Indeed, such tags are categorised by Holmes (1995) as softening tags. No requests or offers were found in the BNC-SDEM corpus analysed by Axelsson (2011: 134, 240). The fiction corpus included 5.2% (13) such TQs. Requests using TQs are infrequent in the present database (1.5% (1)) and offers not present.

5.2.5 Addressee-centered rhetorical questions

Addressee-centered rhetorical questions, a category identified by Axelsson (2011), are not present in the retail corpus. These TQs work by

try[ing] to exert different kinds of influence on the hearer without any response being expected although a potential negotiation is indicated by the tag. They include challenges, accusations, reminders and assumptions about the hearer

(Axelsson 2011: 85-86)

. The absence of these types of TQs in the present retail context relative to the BNC-SDEM data is significant (Chi-square with Yates correction, $p < 0.0001$)

and suggested to have less to do with the use of peremptory and aggressive tags in the Irish context and rather more to do with the genre of the service encounter and the need – specifically on the side of the sales assistant – to maintain positive relations with the customer (cf. 3).

5.3 Invariant tags, sure-tags in IrE

The following section deals with the use of the invariant tags *is it?* and *isn't it?* and also with the use of *sure*-tags in the present retail corpus.

No instances of invariant *isn't it?* were found in the retail corpus and only three instances of invariant *is it?* tags (cf. Table 11).¹²

Table 11. Invariant uses of *isn't it?* and *is it?* in IrE retail corpus

| <i>Isn't it?</i> | <i>Is it?</i> |
|------------------|---------------|
| 0 | 3 (4.4%) |

These findings are considerably lower than Lucek's (2011) analysis of SPICE-Ireland which reports as many as 32 invariant uses of *is it?* and 42 invariant

¹² It should be noted, however, that as pointed out above in the case of *innit*, instances of *is it?* and *isn't it?* which were accompanied the verb *is* and an appropriate NP in the anchor clause were treated as canonical uses in line with Tottie and Hoffmann (2006: 286). However, theoretically, use may actually be invariant.

uses of *isn't it?* in the face-to-face texts of SPICE-Ireland alone. Given such divergencies, a supplementary analysis of invariant TQs in the complete SPICE-Ireland was carried out in the context of an ongoing study of TQs in ICE-Ireland (cf. Barron et al. forthcoming, Barron and Pandarova forthcoming). This analysis revealed only eight instances of invariant *is it?* and only five instances of invariant *isn't it?* over the complete corpus, findings which are in line with the present retail analysis. It is difficult to explain the differences between this analysis and Lucek's data given a lack of definition of invariant tags in Lucek (2011). However, they are presumed to be related to different understandings of invariant tags. Other invariant tags apart from *is it?* and *isn't it?* were also recorded. In total, 21 invariant tags were identified, 20 of which were BE tags.

Sure-tags are formed using *sure* + pronoun + operator (cf. example (13)). Kallen and Kirk (2012: 112) note their occurrence in the SPICE-Ireland corpus (total: 9). In the present corpus, seven *sure*-tags are found – a rather high number given the smaller corpus size relative to the ICE-Ireland corpus. The functions realised by the *sure*-tags are given in Table 12 below. Most (85.7%) are speaker-centered, employed in speaker assessments and evaluations.

Table 12. Functions realised by *sure*-tags in IrE retail corpus

| | (n=7) |
|------------------------------|-----------|
| Speaker-centered rhetoricals | 85.7% (6) |
| Addressee-centered | - |
| Conversation initiating | 14.2% (1) |
| Confirmation-eliciting | - |
| Requests/ suggestions | - |

(13) sales assistant: how are you keeping yourself Ann?
customer: not too bad Margaret not too bad
sales assistant: tough <.> the summer is
customer: it doesn't get easier
sales assistant: it doesn't <.>
customer. no
sales assistant: <[> no <.> you know </> <.> that's true <.> **sure it
doesn't** <.> </> no
customer: <[> it doesn't really you know that's being truthful </>

(IrE retail corpus)

A supplementary search of ICE-GB for the forms *sure* with the pronouns *I, you, he, she, it, we, they* and also *sure is* and *sure there* did not yield any *sure*-tags suggesting that *sure*-tags are not a feature of BrE (cf. Pandarova in preparation, for further details). In contrast to the use of *sure*-tags, *so*-tags (e.g. *so I have, so they are*) are more frequent in the SPICE-Ireland corpus numbering 38 (Kallen

and Kirk 2012: 113)) but they are not found in the present corpus. Further research is required to investigate this difference. Possible explanations include the influence of genre constraints or indeed a possible link between the use of such tags and macro-social factors, such as gender, age, social status, ethnic identity and region (cf. Barron/Schneider 2009).

6. Conclusion

The present study has highlighted many features of TQs in IrE in general and also specifically in an IrE service encounter. In addition, the findings have been compared to previous research on everyday conversation in BrE and AmE and written and spoken data in the SPICE-corpus of IrE. The use of TQs in the retail corpus supports much of the previous research on TQs in IrE, BrE and AmE. BE, for instance, was the preferred operator followed by DO, as has been found to be the case in BrE and AmE. Also, the declarative structure is employed most often, a finding in line with previous research on TQs. Reversed polarity tags are most frequent and in particular +/- polarity, which is also in line with previous research for IrE, BrE and AmE.

The present analysis also points to a number of features of canonical TQs in the IrE retail context which shed light on TQ use particularly in IrE. It also provides information on a genre-specific use of TQs. Anchors, for instance, took the form of interrogatives to a higher extent than suggested in previous research on BrE or AmE, a fact which is reminiscent of previous proposals that interrogative anchors may be a dialectal feature. In addition, the rather high use of positive constant (+/+) polarity was noted. Constant polarity tags, while employed in BrE, have been suggested to be rare in AmE. However, even relative to BrE, use of constant polarity tags was high. In contrast, Wong (2007:50-51) finds positive constant polarity TQs to be the second highest-ranking type in ICE-HK after positive-negative ones. However, she considers all such TQs but one to be “ill-formed”, unfortunately without illustrating what is meant by this description. Further analyses of the forms realizing the constant polarity tags revealed that this feature related to a particularly high use of the canonical tag *is it?* Indeed, occurrences of *is it?* were high in the present corpus relative to previous findings for BrE and AmE but interestingly not in comparison to corpus research on IrE, suggesting use of *is it?* to be a variety-specific feature. Functional analyses of *is it?* revealed that the form was only found to realise the confirmation-eliciting function. This finding provides some

support for Kimps' (2007) suggestion that there is a relationship between broad polarity types and pragmatic function.¹³ In particular, Kimps (2007: 289) suggests that constant polarity TQs exhibit “a low degree of commitment towards the truth of the proposition by the speaker and a high degree of responsibility towards the hearer”. This description is one which certainly fits the constant polarity *is it?* tags in the present data set given that all of them realised a confirmation-eliciting function.

Interestingly, on the topic of function, the confirmation-eliciting function was one which was found more often in the service encounter corpus than in the demographic component of the BNC. In the absence of functional data on IrE, this difference may be related to the retail context rather than to IrE. However, given that the higher use of canonical *is it?* tags in the retail corpus – where they all realised a confirmation-eliciting function – was reflected in SPICE-Ireland., further research is required to investigate whether there is a higher occurrence of the confirmation-eliciting function in IrE in general (cf. Barron et al. forthcoming).

Sure-tags, a type of variable sentence tag, were found in the data. A corpus analysis of ICE-GB did not reveal any instances of the tag, supporting

¹³ It should be noted here that Kimps' (2007) proposal was based on declarative constant polarity TQs only in contrast to the present constant polarity data included both declarative and interrogative anchors.

claims that such tags are a distinguishing variety-specific feature of TQs in IrE. Finally, some instances of invariant *is it?* were also identified. Canonical uses were, however, more frequent clarifying previous research which posited a higher use of *is it?* in Irish English without differentiating between canonical and invariant uses. Further research on a broader database is required to further differentiate invariant and canonical uses of *is it?* and *isn't it?*.

Other avenues of research stemming from the present analysis include the need to test the hypotheses put forward in the present analysis particularly given the presence of a single individual in the role of sales assistant in the present data. Also, further research is necessary to contrast the present service encounter data with comparable data in Britain and America and in general, there is a need for an increase in genre-specific analyses of TQs, as no corpus analysis to date has dealt with genre-specific discourse with the exception of the present study and Axelsson's (2011) contrast of spoken conversation with fiction dialogue. In a further step, such genre-specific analyses might investigate the use of the full range of canonical and invariant tags in a single genre. This latter focus is particularly interesting from a variational pragmatic perspective (cf. Schneider and Barron 2008, Barron and Schneider 2009, Schneider 2010, Barron 2014, forthcoming on variational pragmatics) as a single function may be realised preferentially using a canonical tag in one society and using an invariant tag in another society despite the fact that both

societies share the same language. Allerton (2009: 320, 323), for instance, suggests that AmE prefers invariable tags (e.g. *right?*) where BrE uses canonical tags. Tottie (2009: 361-362) also mentions this possibility but she points out that other factors, such as sociopragmatic factors, may also play a role. Specifically, she suggests that it may be, for instance, that the functions realised by canonical TQs in BrE are not used to the same degree in AmE. In addition, epistemic particles, such as *probably*, *likely*, *presumably* may on occasion be used instead of the canonical tag functions.. Schneider (2011: 24-26, 2012) is an interesting analysis in this regard. His study, an analysis of small talk in the context of party discourse in variational perspective, shows that remarks about a party in conversational openings are overwhelmingly realised using routine formulae of the form *great party, isn't it?*, consisting of a positively evaluative adjective, the noun party and a TQ. Schneider points to clear preferences in the choice of tag across IrE, BrE and AmE, namely a preference towards the tag *huh?* in AmE, *isn't it?* in the IrE and BrE data to realise what in the present context would be a conversation-initiating TQ. This preference supports previous research claiming that canonical tags are less preferred in AmE than in BrE (cf. Tottie and Hoffmann 2006). However, the question might also be raised as to whether such preferences are not perhaps function-dependent within a particular variety. Future research might address this question.

Appendix

Transcription conventions

| | |
|-----------|--|
| <.> | indicates short pause, i.e. any perceptible break in phonation equal in length to a single syllable, taking into account the tempo of the speaker's delivery |
| <...> | longer pause, any break in phonation which is longer than a single syllable |
| <[> | indicates that overlap begins |
| </[> | indicates that overlap ends |
| <whisper> | indicates paralinguistic information (e.g. whisper, laughter) |
| xxx | unclear transcription |
| ? | rising intonation |

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