Variability in English yes/no questions: A study of communicative functions

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Abstract

This paper investigates variability in the production of English yes/no questions. It further, probes the role of communicative functions in the construction of such variants by Canadian English native speakers as well as the role of gender in the use of such communicative functions. For this purpose, thirty Canadian English native speakers performed the Edinburgh Map Task and made English yes/no question variants considering the context and functions of the questions. The data were subject to Chi-square and correlational analyses. Based on the results, variability was observed in English yes/no questions. Moreover, particular English yes/no question variants were associated with particular communicative functions. In the usage of the communicative functions, Canadian English males and females showed different linguistic behavior. Regarding the correlation between gender and communicative functions, it was indicated that the use of communicative functions in the construction of yes/no question variants was not gender-based.

Keywords: Variationist Sociolinguistics; Variability; Communicative functions; Gender

1. Introduction

All native speakers of a language adjust their speech patterns generally depending on the context: from relaxed conversation in familiar surroundings to a more formal setting. In most cases, the changes...
we make are extremely subtle but nonetheless noticeable, and a perfectly natural way of making the people we are talking to feel at ease. This type of variation has been looked at in details in Variationist Sociolinguistics. According to Tagliamonte (2005), Variationist Sociolinguistics is considered as the branch of linguistics in which the key features of language go hand in hand and are in balance with each other: linguistic structure and social structure; grammatical meaning and social meaning.  

To date, several research studies have been carried out in different languages on the nature of these variations and the factors which lead to it. These factors range from syntactic and semantic to social and pragmatic ones. Chang (1997), Dewaele (1999), Coveney (1995, 2002), Quillard (2001), and Zwanziger (2008) are among those who have studied language variation and the factors behind it. 

This study is an attempt to explore how English yes/no questions vary among the Canadian English native speakers and the role of communicative function in the use of English yes/no question variants. As language, in general, is used differently by males and females (Coates, 1986), this study also tends to investigate the difference in use of communicative functions by male and female Canadian English native speakers.

1.1. English yes/no questions

White et al. (1991) assert that English yes/no questions involve subject-auxiliary inversion, and require do-support or do-insertion as Cowan (2008) calls it, if no other auxiliary is present, as in 1a and 1b:

(1) a. Is John playing tennis?
b. Does Mary live in Montreal?

Cowan (2008) classifies English yes/no questions into positive and negative yes/no questions and reduced yes/no questions which itself is classified into elliptical yes/no questions and declarative yes/no questions.

Positive and negative yes/no questions are formed following what White et al. (1991) stated. The only difference in these two types is contracting the verbal element at the beginning of the question with not as shown in (2a and 2b).

(2) a. Are you coming?
b. Aren’t you coming?

Positive yes/no questions usually do not imply any expectation about what the answer will be. The person who asks a positive question, for instance, does not necessarily have any idea whether the answer will be yes or no. Negative questions, on the other hand, are generally asked to confirm a specific expectation or assumption on the part of the person who asks the question.

According to Cowan (2008), yes/no questions are often reduced in informal conversations. Two ways in which this is done are by the formation of elliptical yes/no questions and by formation of declarative (statement) yes/no questions. English native speakers sometimes reduce yes/no questions by omitting auxiliary verbs and copular be to form elliptical statements.

(3) a. Are you coming?
b. You coming?

While in declarative yes/no questions, they have the form of a statement but also contain question intonation as indicated in (4).

(4) a. Are you coming?
b. You are coming?

Tag questions, confirmation check phrases, and single phrases are the questions that have not been classified under yes/no questions by Cowan or other linguists; however, as they require a yes or no answer, they can be classified as confirmation check phrases, in general, and considered as a yes/no
question variant. Confirmation check phrases are expressions immediately follow an utterance to elicit confirmation that the utterance has been correctly heard or understood. They are expressions such as right, yes, ok, etc. at the end of a declarative statement (Long, 1980). Tag questions are short question forms following a declarative statement. Single phrases consist of noun, verb, adjective, adverb, and preposition phrases asked to get confirmation from the speaker.

1.2. Communicative (pragmatic) functions and gender

Every oral communication is managed through language and the meanings in the mind of the speakers and hearers. Thus, all questions and statements are normally presented with a function in the mind of the speaker. Pragmatically speaking, these functions are labelled as communicative functions. The functions targeted in this research are echo, presupposed context, topic-introducing, rhetorical, and self-addressed. Covneye (2002) specifies an echo question as one directed to a listener for a response and is a repetition from a previous turn. A question with a presupposed context (hereafter PS) is one that requires certain shared information between the interactants (Boeckx, Stateva and Stepanov, 2001) A topic-introducing question (henceforth TI) is defined as a question that presents new information into the discourse. A rhetorical question may be used for effect, irony, or sarcasm (hereafter R). A self-addressed question (henceforth SA) is an interlocutor’s question directed to him/herself, which accordingly does not require or permit an answer.

Along with other social variables, gender has proved to be of great importance particularly in linguistic variation. Ashby (1977) documents differences in the usage of question variants according to profession, gender, and age. Following the gender studies and language, Lakoff (1975) marks out that women use more tag questions and question intonation in declarative statements. Following the previous projects, Coates (1986) specifically discusses the differences in males and females’ speech concerning the social factor of gender.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The population of the current study was composed of 30 male and female Canadian English native speakers who were born, raised, and were still residing in Toronto, Canada. Their age range was between 18 and 26. Although the Canadian participants might be born to non-Canadian parents and could speak and be affected by other languages, they were assumed to be all originally Canadian English native speakers. They were undergraduate students studying at Glendon College, York University, Toronto, Canada. The participants were not chosen randomly from a large population; the two criteria for their selection were their nationality and knowledge of French. Regarding their nationality, they all persistently claimed to be Canadian English native speakers. As the researchers intended for French not to have any effect on the English native speakers’ linguistic performance, they were orally questioned about their level of proficiency and not evaluated through administrating French tests. However, they all claimed that they were beginners in French.
2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. Edinburgh map task (EMT)

The map task used in this study was the modified version of the Edinburgh Map Task (EMT) compiled by Human Communication Research Center. It contained two parallel maps designated for the Instruction Giver and the Instruction Follower. The maps were composed of several items following the pattern set in the original EMT. The Instruction Follower’s map had fewer items than the Instruction Giver’s. The maps were divided into three parts, two of which were similar. There were “start” and “destination” points for the followers, which were not specified on their maps. The general objective of this map task was to elicit information from the participants in the form of yes/no questions.

2.2.2. Background information questionnaire

An English background questionnaire was administered to the Canadian English participants to control the effect of some social factors that probably might have influence on the question variants produced by the participants. First, the background questionnaire was validated by the experts; the participants were asked to provide their gender, age, region of origin in Canada, profession, and parents’ profession. The only social factor under investigation in this study was gender while the rest including their age, nationality, and the social class they belonged to were controlled.

2.3. Procedures

Considering the respective informal speech context, the participants were paired. The pairs were organized in male-male, male-female, and female-female categories. They were briefed on what the maps would entail and what the Instruction Giver and Follower would do from the start. The Instruction Followers were asked to find the starting point, look for the directions, and eventually reach the destination by inquiring information from the Instruction Giver.

The type, frequency, and percentage of English yes/no question variants were tabulated and chi-square and correlation analyses were run on the data to reveal the significant role of communicative functions in the production of such variants as well as the role of gender in the use of communicative functions.

3. Results

The recordings of 30 English males and females’ conversations on the Edinburgh map task contained 3458 tokens of yes/no question variants. The types of these tokens, their frequency and percentage, the chi-square and correlation analyses are tabulated as follows.

Among the variants, positive and negative yes/no questions (42.04%) was the most frequently used one followed by confirmation check phrases (33.50%) and declarative statement yes/no questions (24.43%), respectively (Table 1).
Table 1. Frequency and percentage of English yes/no question variants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variant</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive and negative yes/no questions</td>
<td>1454</td>
<td>42.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declarative statement yes/no questions</td>
<td>845</td>
<td>24.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmation check phrases</td>
<td>1159</td>
<td>33.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3458</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The English yes/no question variants were individually tested with respect to sensitivity to particular communicative functions via chi-square analysis. We assumed that communicative functions were massively used with such variants; nonetheless, only confirmation check phrases were greatly associated with communicative functions (Table 2).

Table 2. Chi-square values of communicative functions and English yes/no question variants at 95% confidence level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variant</th>
<th>Pearson Chi-square value</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive and negative yes/no questions</td>
<td>507.500</td>
<td>0.146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declarative statement yes/no questions</td>
<td>465.000</td>
<td>0.171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmation check phrases</td>
<td>79.091</td>
<td>0.028*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The significant values are asterisked.

To probe the role of gender in the use of the communicative functions the correlation analysis was run on the data. Gender showed to play a role in only one communicative function (the rhetorical function, the P value = 0.000).

Table 3. Correlation coefficients of gender and communicative functions (English)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variant</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation Coefficient – P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.106</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The significant values are asterisked.
4. Discussion

Variationist Sociolinguists believe that variation exists in any language and different factors including pragmatic ones could be responsible for that. In this study, variation could be observed in English yes/no questions. The participants made different forms in order to communicate a single meaning. Examples of yes/no question variants produced by Canadian English native speakers are as follows:

(5) a. Do I go to the camera shop?
    b. Camera shop you said?
    c. I go to the camera shop, right?
    d. Shouldn’t I go to the camera shop?

In this paper, we have studied the role of communicative functions in the construction of the English yes/no question variants and the role of gender in the use of such variants, as well. The first conclusion made is that confirmation check phrases and declarative statements, respectively, were more associated with communicative functions. It could be predicted that topic introduction and presupposed context were the most frequently used functions due to the nature of the map task; however, they were not used much. The only variant observed to be associated with a topic introduction function was confirmation check phrase. It seems that the participants did not take the functions into account while they were constructing positive and negative yes/no questions as well as declarative statement yes/no questions. A post-task interview would be appropriate to inquire whether or not they have not been conscious of the functions while they were constructing these two types of variants. Or it might be assumed that positive and negative yes/no questions and declarative statement yes/no questions can be associated with any communicative functions; hence, they had no particular sensitivity to any particular communicative function.

The next conclusion drawn is that the use of communicative functions in the construction of yes/no question variants by the Canadian English native speakers was not totally gender-based. Most types of these functions were not be used by a specific gender; however, the rhetorical function among English speakers showed to be gender-directed. Females paid more attention to use this function. This could be due to the fact that women are more willing to produce effective and sarcastic speech than men. It follows that in inquiring information the participants behaved similarly and neither males nor females made an attempt to confirm a gender-based language in this respect.

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References


