

The portrayal and translation of youth language in fiction:

The case of question tags

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Introduction

The speech of young people has peculiarities that make it distinct from other age groups. One feature that stands out is the use of non-canonical question tags¹, which are mainly used to confirm that the listener is following what is being said. As such, authors use them to make fictive dialogue between teenage characters more life-like. English especially has an array of question tags that other languages do not; how, then, is this issue tackled in translation?

Methods

The instances that have been analysed for this study belong to an ongoing corpus project. The corpus is made up of the dialogues between teenage characters from five novels published in English-speaking countries from 2001 to 2012 and their translations into Spanish and Catalan. For the present study, sections from three novels have been selected, which amount up to approximately 10,000 words.

“All right, Krystal. Why don’t you tell me what happened?”
“Your ’usband said sumthin’ abou’ Mister Fairbrother, **right**, an’ I couldn’t hear what he was saying, **right**, so Nikki tole me, and I couldn’t fucking—”
“Krystal!—”
“—couldn’t believe it, **right**, an’ I shouted but I never laughed! I never fuck—”
“—Krystal—”
“I never laughed, **all right?**”

The Casual Vacancy, J.K. Rowling (2012)



Results

| Question tags ST EN (34) | Pragmatic functions ² |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">Canonical (9): <i>isn't it, are you, is it</i>Non-canonical (25): <i>right, righ', all right, eh, huh, innit</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Attitudinal (11)Confirmatory (9)Aggressive (9)Facilitating (4)Peremptory (1) |

Discussion

- The great majority of question tags are **non-canonical**, which shows a will to recreate fictive youth language that is close to real speech.
- It is worth noting that this is partly due to certain **stereotypical characters** that overuse non-canonical tags. Stereotypical behaviour is also reflected in the function of the question tags: a great deal of them are used to emphasize discourse without seeking confirmation (attitudinal), or used to provoke the listener (aggressive).
- The **Spanish and Catalan translations** display a somewhat limited range of question tags. However, some strategies are applied to convey the oral and colloquial values of question tags, such as adding expletives in aggressive turns, modal language (*Segur que...*) but also discarding them altogether, especially in attitudinal tags in mid-turn position.

References

- ¹Palacios Martínez, I. M. (2011). The language of British teenagers: A preliminary study of its main grammatical features. *Atlantis*, 33(1), 105–126.
- ²Tottie, G., & Hoffmann, S. (2006). Tag Questions in British and American English. *Journal of English Linguistics*, 34, 283–311.