Imperative clauses with question tags: diachronic approach

Merkuryeva Natalia

associate professor

Moscow Metropolitan Governance Yury Luzhkov University, Russia

e-mail: nata2lya1@mail.ru

Abstract. The article discusses special constructions of the English language like *Open the window, will you?*. The sentences under analysis consist of a prop sentence (anchor) made of imperative and a predicative attached question (tag). The linguistic material is taken from the texts written by English authors during 16th-21st centuries. Lexical and grammatical details of the tags (the forms and the number of the components, their composition) are charted. The peculiarities of the design of the constructions (their graphical representation in the texts, the location of the tags in the anchors) are also paid attention to. It is shown that in the constructions from the texts of the 16-17th centuries in the composition of the tag the negative particle is present as a mandatory element, which in the 18th century becomes a variant one. Until the mid-twentieth century the variety of attached clauses is described by three variants *can't you, will you, won't you*. From the second half of the 20th century onwards, *shall we* (in the anchors with the initiative *let*-phrase) and *would you* are also used. In all the periods described, the attached structure gravitates towards the end of the construction and is placed in the end of the prop sentence, but in the 20th century it can also be built into it.

Key words: imperative, tag questions, historical syntax, spoken interaction, authorial styles.

Introduction. Tag question constructions (disjunctive questions) are a widespread phenomenon in contemporary colloquial discourse and have been the subject of many research works. One of the varieties of such constructions is a sentence in which an imperative clause and a truncated interrogative clause are asyndetically combined.

There are three main variants of the modern imperative sentences – with the verb in the basic form *Get off the table*, with the auxiliary verb with the negation *Don't forget about the deposit* and the sentence with *let's*, *Let's catch up with Louise*. If an imperative sentence is a part of a construction with a predicative attached question, such a question is represented by the structures *can't you?, won't you?, will you?, would you?, shall we?* The attached part may also contain the adverb *please*: *Oh, Clare, turn it up **will you please***? [Biber, et al., 2007, p. 210, 219]; the purpose of adding a tag, whether or not the adverb, *Make a cup of tea, **would you***? or *Open the window, **would you please**?*, is to soften the categoricalness of directives [Tottie, et al. 2006, p. 298; Visser, 2002, p. 1722; Wells, 2007, p. 50].

As the tags in the constructions are not structurally related to the prop (anchor) parts and are grammatically immutable elements, such attached questions are referred to as unsystematic because they cannot be systematically described [Celce-Murcia et al., 1983, p. 165]. The tag *shall we* forms only prop sentences beginning with *Let's* [Long, 1961; O'Connor, 2006]. In constructions with *Let's* the attached part is also formed by the verb *will*, the choice of verb *will / shall* depends on a dialect (Huddleston, 1998, p. 140). In an anchor sentence with *Don't* only the attached part *will you* is used – *Don't make a noise, **will you**?* [Quirk, et al., 1972, p. 405; Huddleston 1998, p. 140].

In the works of the researchers who study tag question constructions from the point of view of historical syntax, the imperative with an attached predicative part is treated as a kind of the disjunctive question. F.Visser argues that the construction "imperative + tag" appeared in the 18th century in the text of drama [Visser, 2002, p. 1698]. The data obtained by G. Totti and S. Hoffmann's findings using corpus linguistics techniques indicate that imperative tag question constructions had also been used earlier: out of 136 examples of disjunctive questions found in the texts of 197 plays written in the 16th century, five ones present the imperative with tags [Tottie, et al. 2009, p. 136].

An increase in the frequency of the use of tag question constructions in fiction texts since the eighteenth century is recorded: from about 50 cases per million words from the mid-1500s to the mid-1700s to 425 cases after the 1900s [Hoffmann, 2006]. Due to the general increase in the frequency of use of constructions with an attached question, we can also expect an increase in the diversity of the constructions "imperative + tag' as we move along the diachronic axis.

Methodology

The material for the analysis is sentences from the dialogue lines of fiction created by English authors in the 16th-21st centuries. In total, the texts of more than 300 works have been studied. The research is based on the methods of total sampling of the studied material and linguistic research of linguistic facts, comparative analysis of one language (English) at the level of communication specifics in different historical periods and linguistic description. After the illustrative example in the text, the time of the first publication or writing of the work and its author are indicated (clarified by [A Dictionary of Literature in the English Language, 1970; The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature, 1977; The Dictionary of Literary Biography, 1982; Reference Guide to English Literature, 1991]), title and page in the source.

Result and Analysis

Let us consider the ways of development of constructions with imperative and short interrogative clauses, paying attention to lexical and grammatical characteristics and some related functional and stylistic features.

The imperative, which forms the prop part of the constructions under consideration, is one of the oldest grammatical categories [Curme, 1931, p. 430]; since Old English imperative sentences has retained a single-part structure. The second person pronoun *you / thou*, which can be in the preposition of the verb-predicate, or can be omitted, performs the function not of the subject, but of the address [Biber, et al., 2007, p. 219]. In the early works already, we find

prop sentences constructed not only with a verb in the morphological form of the imperative, as in *Why strew rushes on it, **can you not** (...)* (1588, "Arden of Feversham", quoted from [Tottie, Hoffmann, 2009, p. 136]), but also with an adverb. This is, for example, the construction *Away villaine, (...) away false Sicophant, **wilt thou not**?* (1564, Edwards R., "Damon and Pithias", p. 82), where the imperative is formed by the adverb *away*, which comes from the Proto-Indo-European root *wegh*, meaning *to go, to move* [Etymology Dictionary Online]. Most of the constructions we found from later works contain an anchor clause with a verb. A variant of the prop clause with initial *let's* came into use in the early 1900s.

In discussing tag structures, we will look at the choice of constituent words, the forms they have, and their ordering.

The tag is a short predicate phrase the lexical structure of which is quite conservative. In the attached clauses of the 16th-19th centuries dialogue texts, the predicate is represented by two verbs – *will* and *can*, that can be illustrated by the above examples of the 16th century with the attached structures *can you not, wilt thou not*, by the sentences from the works written in the 17th century *Let one alone, **can't you**?* (1676, Wycherley W., "The Plain-Dealer", p. 54), 18th century *Stay a moment, **can't ye**?* (1764, Murphy A., "Three Weeks after Marriage", p. 28), *Tell Mr. Gage, **will you**?* (1778, Sheridan R., "The Camp", p. 161), and 19th century *Speak, **can't you**?* (1850, Gaskell E.C., "The Moorland Cottage", p. 138), *Reynolds, just take a look at them, **will ye**?* (1870, Reade Ch., "Put yourself in His Place", p. 60). The use of verbs other than *will* and *can* in the attached part is not recorded in texts created earlier than the first half of the 20th century.

The tag clauses of *can't you, will you, won't you*, as for example, in the structures *Come down quietly, **can't you**?* (1900, Jerome K.J., "Three Men on the Bummel", p. 133), *Ask for twenty thousand, **will you**?* (1958, Castle J., Hailey A., "Flight into Danger", p. 26), *Have a drink, **won't you**?* (1930, Waugh E., "Vile Bodies", p. 48) are common in the texts of artworks of 20th century.

The verb *shall* appears in the tags of constructions with an imperative anchor sentence in early 20th century texts, *Let's sit here for a bit, **shall we**?* (1915, Maugham W.S., "Of Human Bondage", p. 256) and is widely used later. The attached part with the verb *would* appears in the studied constructions around the middle of the 20th century, *Open the window, **would you**?* (1963, Murdich I., "The Unicorn" quoted from [Visser, 2002, p. 1722]) and as well used by authors in 21st century: *So just do something about it, **would you**?* (2006, Gilbert E., "Eat. Pray. Love", p. 234), *Bring it here, **would you**?* (2018, Ley R., "Her Mother's Secret", p. 120).

In addition to the verb-predicate, the indispensable part of the attached question is the second person pronoun *you* or *thou*; with the introduction of tags with the verb *shall*, the pronoun *we* is combined with it. In the early stages of the constructions functioning, until about the middle of the eighteenth century, the negative particle *not*, as can be seen in the examples above, was also an obligatory component.

In texts from the middle of the 18th century, there appear constructions in which the adjoined part does not have negation – the loss of the negative particle affects only the clause with the verb *will*, whereas with the verb *can*, negation is used steadily. The texts contain constructions with an attached question with negation, as well as without negation: *Give me your hand at parting, however, Violante, **wont you**?* (1714, Centlivre S., "The Wonder", p. 64), *Let me alone, mun, **will you**?* (1737, Fielding H., "Miss Lucy in Town", p. 1047), later on this tendency is maintained.

In constructions of all studied periods, the verb and the pronoun are permanent components of the attached clause. Taking them to be compulsory components, and the negative particle to be a compulsory component in the 16th century and later a variant one, we shall regard other words included in the tag clause as additional ones. The lexical composition of the additional components is not diverse. We have not encountered additional elements in the studied texts of the 16-17th centuries, which can be explained by the low frequency of the use

of tag questions in this period. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts, when using an additional word as part of an attached structure, authors employ various pragmatic markers, including the imperative *do*, as can be seen in the sentence from the eighteenth-century play *Knock the house down,* ***do, will you****?* (1754, Murphy A., "The Apprentice", p. 63). The adverb *please*, as in the example *Then crack some ice,* ***will you please****?* (1996, Robbins H., "The Stallion", p. 264) can also form the tag part of a sentence. In addition, the adjoined phrase sometimes includes an address, like the final word in the example *Don't do anything hasty,* ***will you, love****?* (2001, Collier C., "Swansea Girls", p. 479). The main purpose of the additional word is to reinforce the emotive component of the question.

Referring to the linking of a particular tag to a particular anchor, we should note the construction with the verb *let*. We see examples of *let*-constructions in the texts of 17th century *Let one alone,* ***can't you****?* (1676, Wycherley W., "The Plain-Dealer", p. 54), 18th century *No, Antonio, we are rivals no more; so let us be friends,* ***will yo****u?* (1775, Sheridan R., "The Duenna", p. 72), 19th century *Let it alone,* ***will you****?* (1859, Eliot G., "Adam Bede", p. 4), *Let me look at it,* ***will you****?* (1866, Gaskell E.C., "Wives and Daughters", p. 38). Until the 20th century, there is a tendency to choose *will you* as an attached question for a prop sentence with *let*. In the 20th century, the combination *shall we* is also used as a tag for an anchor sentence with *let*: *Let the picks get out before we move,* ***shall we****?* (1963, Frankau P., "Sing for your supper", quoted from [Visser, 2002, p. 1610]).

Throughout the 20th century there is no unified variant of the tag when an attached part to an imperative with the *let's* combination is created. S. Maugham uses *shall we*: *Let's sit here for a bit,* ***shall we****?* (1915, Maugham W.S., "Of Human Bondage", p. 256), J. Galsworthy – *won't you*: *Let's begin again, as if nothing had been.* ***Won't you****?* (1928, Galsworthy J., "The Forsyte Saga", p. 378), H. Bates gives the construction *One day, when we're big, let's be really married,* ***shall us****?* (1928, Bates H.E., "Love in a Wych-Elm", p. 225) with the

verb *shall* and the personal pronoun in the objective case *us*, H. Robbins uses the tag *can't we*: *But let's put all that behind us, **can't we**?* (1996, Robbins H., "The Stallion", p. 67). In the 21st century the *shall we* structure is widely used in the *let's*-construction: *OK, Special Agent Reilly, let's start from the beginning, **shall we**?* (2014, Khoury R., "The End Game", p. 101).

These are some of the lexical characteristics of the constructions under study. Let us then turn to their grammatical features.

The joined part in the texts of the sixteenth century consists of full forms of words. The word order corresponds to the characteristic word order of the tag with negation, which is represented by the sequence "verb + pronoun + *not*" [Rissanen, 1994, 1999; Merkuryeva, 2020, p. 817]. We can see that the negative particle is in the final of the attached part: *Away villaine, (…) away false Sicophant, **wilt thou not**?* (1564, Edwards R., "Damon and Pithias", p. 82), *Draw it out: now strike, fool, **canst thou not**?* (1590, Greene R., "James the Fourth", p. 74).

In the occurrence of the shortened form of the negative particle in the tag of the construction "imperative + attached question", which we record in a text of the second half of the 17th century, *not* is moved from the end of the tag phrase closer to the verb: *Let one alone, **can't you**?* (1676, Wycherley W., "The Plain-Dealer", p. 54). Later on, the presentation of the attached part with the negation is unified, and, unlike other varieties of constructions with tag question (such as those formed by a narrative prop sentence, with which the tag is morphologically similar *If you come while I'm asleep, **you'll** rouse me, **will you not**?* (1869, Robertson T., "Progress", p. 574)), does not include the full form of the negative particle: *Repeat it to him, **can't you**?* (1732, Fielding H., "The Miser", p. 970), *Get off my head, **can't you**?* (1889, Jerome K.J., "Three Men in a Boat", p. 31), *Tell me, **won't you**?* (1928, Galsworthy J., "The Forsyte Saga", p. 265).

Let us look at the ways in which "imperative + tag" constructions are designed and where the tag clause is placed in them.

In all the examples we found, the prop and attached clauses are separated by a punctuation mark. The most common way to separate the tag is with a comma, this sign is used in the construction from the 16th century text: *Why strew rushes on it, **can you not**(...)* (1588, "Arden of Feversham", quoted from [Tottie, Hoffmann, 2009, p. 136]). The examples from works of later periods given above show that the use of the comma at the border of the prop and attached clauses is preserved and is becoming traditional. In this regard, other punctuation marks can be considered as stylistic tools used by individual authors. The formation of the boundary between the anchor and the attached clauses with a question mark can be seen in Collie Cibber's text: *Now strike me to the ground? **can't you**?* (1697, Cibber C., "Woman's Wit", p. 164). Some nineteenth-century authors choose different (from the comma) ways of separating prop and attached parts of a construction. For example, Sh. Brontë uses a dash *Let that alone - **will you**?* (1853, Brontë Sh., "Villette", p. 84), T. Robertson uses the exclamation mark *Don't tell anybody - not a word! not a word! **Will you**?* (1868, Robertson T., "Play", p. 502).

In eighteenth-century prose texts, the attached clause and the anchor clause can be separated by the author's comment: *"Go, you fool," says I, "**can't you**;"* (1724, Defoe D., "Roxana" p. 53). This kind of textual design, where a character's words are broken up by the author's words to separate the pragmatic marker, is already in use in the Middle English period. For example, in one of the 13th-century versions of the Gospel of Nicodemus, the attached non-predicative part, represented by the adverb *sikerly*, is separated from the prop sentence by the phrase *says pelate*: *"Þan ertou king algate," says pelate, "sikerly?"* (1200s, "Gospel of Nicodemus"). From the 18th century onwards, the placement of an author's comment before an attached question is a regular occurrence in texts: *"Let me tell her," said Mrs. Woodward, "**will you, Gertrude**?"* (1858, Trollope A., "The Three Clerks", p. 161).

In the early stages, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, regardless of whether the prop sentence is simple or compound, the attached question is placed at the end of the structure.

In 18th-century texts there are some examples in which the anchor part is represented by a compound sentence. In them the tag can be attached to the clause, placed at the end of the sentence as in *No, Antonio, we are rivals no more; so let us be friends, **will you***? (1775, Sheridan R., "The Duenna", p. 72), but also, the tag can be attached to the clause, placed at the beginning of the sentence as in *find some other Road **can't you**, and don't keep wrestling me with your nonsense.* (1762, Bickerstaff I., "Love in a Village", p. 14-15).

In nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts, we see constructions with an attached question being in postposition to a compound prop sentence or in its interposition. In the example *I shan't be more than an hour and a half - so - go home, dear, **won't you***? (1870, Robertson T., "Nightingale", p. 409) the imperative clause finishes the construction and the attached question is placed in the final position. Also the final position is demonstrated in the construction *Well, keep Junior here off the controls while I serve coffee, **won't you***? (1958, Castle J., Hailey A., "Flight into Danger", p. 21). In addition, J. Castle and A. Hailey give other ways of placing the attached question. In the example *Get the chief radar operator up here, **will you**, and let me talk to him.* (ibid, p. 82) a clause with an attached question begins the structure and so the tag is found within the anchor sentence. The attached part can be placed not only at the end of the prop clause, but inside it, delimiting a certain part of it. For example, in *Keep it down, **will you***? *to the controller's assistant who was talking on the telephone.* (ibid, p. 80) the tag *will you?* separates the combination *Keep it down*. It can be assumed that the purpose of such an arrangement is to structure the construction, because there is rather a voluminous object-group containing a subordinate sentence *to the controller's assistant who was talking on the telephone* in it. By positioning the attached question in this way, the author

highlights the combination *Keep it down* as the most significant in the construction.

In the dialogues of eighteenth-century plays we find examples of authors creating stylistic devices with the use of "imperative with an attached question" constructions. In the passage *Give me your hand at parting, however, Violante,* ***wont you? (He lays his hand upon her knee several times) Wont you - wont you - wont you?*** (1714, Centlivre S., "The Wonder", p. 64) we see the tag part *wont you* repeated. The technique of repetition is used in order to draw the viewer's attention to the excessive insistence of the personage, in other words, with such a construction of the line, the character's insistence will not go unnoticed by the viewer. The reacting line of the dialogue unity *"In short - I - cannot do with you." "But before me - Into the garden -* **Won't you***?"* (1768, Bickerstaff I., "Lionel and Clarissa", p. 45), based on wordplay and constructed in the genre of flirting, is intended by the author as a hint and serves to create a humorous effect. The final element of the line *won't you* can be imagined as an "imperative + tag question" construction, with the prop sentence undergoing a complete reduction. The perception of the sequence *won't you* as an attached part of a construction with an omitted imperative anchor clause is possible due to two main reasons. The first reason is the context - the preceding *Won't you?* short sentence *Into the garden* indicates the direction of movement, so in the unspoken joining prop sentence the verb of movement can be guessed. The second reason is more profound and directly related to our study: the short attached structure is recognisable to the addressee with both an explicit and an implicit prop sentence, as it is a well-established speech phenomenon and is familiar to the audience. For this reason, it is possible to create stylistic techniques with repetition of the attached part or with its isolation while eliminating the anchor part. Thus, it can be argued that by the 18th century the imperative with an attached question is established as a speech pattern.

Conclusion

The study of the lexico-grammatical characteristics of the constructions "imperative with an attached question" in diachrony in the interval of 16th-21st centuries allows us to draw the following conclusions.

The anchor sentence is relatively structurally stable, in all studied periods it is formed by a verb in the morphological form of the imperative, less frequently by an adverb. Some diversity is introduced by the appearing of *let's*-structure-anchor at the beginning of the 20th century. The tag phrase is characterised by a number of changes concerning the lexical composition, the form in which the components are presented and their location in relation to each other. There are some changes in the principle of placement of an attached clause relative to an anchor clause.

In the 16th century the attached structure has full word forms, the negative particle being its permanent component placed in postposition to the pronoun. In the 17th century the approach to the representation of the negative particle and its localization change - now *not* is placed between a verb and a pronoun and has a shortened form *can't you?, won't you?*. In the 16-17th centuries a negative particle is an obligatory element in the composition of the tag phrase. In the 18th century structures without negation appear. Up to the mid-1900s the variety of tags is described by three types with and without the negation *can't you, will you, won't you*. In the early 1900s the attached phrase *shall we* appear in some constructions with the verb *let* in the anchor sentence. By the mid-twentieth century a stable list of attached questions is formed for the imperative – *can't you, will you, won't you, would you*, as well as *shall we* in constructions with *let's*.

In all the periods described, the tag joined structure gravitates towards the end of the anchor sentence. In the twentieth century, the author may include the attached question inside the prop sentence, delimiting a syntagma.

Thus, the expected increase in the diversity of "imperative + tag question" constructions due to the general increase in the frequency of disjunctive

questions in the author's speech manifests itself in several ways: the choice of modal verbs in the tag phrase is somewhat expanded, the negative particle of the tag turns from a mandatory component into a variable one, the word order of the attached clause is changed; the ways of reflecting the border between the prop and the joined clauses in the text increase in variety, there is variability in the positioning of the attached part in relation to the anchor.

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