

Interrogative Variation in Pakistani English: An Optimality-Theoretic Analysis of Polar, Embedded, and Tag Questions

Shakir Shahzad¹, Behzad Anwar², Rabia Qayyum³

¹PhD Scholar, Department of English, University of Gujrat, Email: 25016102-005@uog.edu.pk

²Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Gujrat, Email: behzad.anwar@uog.edu.pk

³Lecturer in English, Govt. Graduate College for Women, Mandi Bahauddin, Pakistan, Email: rqzair@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates polar, embedded, and tag questions in Pakistani English with a special focus on syntactic and pragmatic variation in their structures. Interrogative forms have attracted limited attention. The present study examines the use of interrogative forms in Pakistani English novels, dramas, and newspapers. For analysis, the study is informed by World Englishes scholarship. To explicate variation in the question forms of Pakistani English, the study employs Optimality Theory (Prince & Smolensky, 2004). The study is predominantly qualitative in nature. The analysis of this study addresses word order, sub-aux inversion, the use of auxiliaries, tag patterns, and the pragmatic functions of various structures in interrogative forms. The findings of the study confirm systematic variation in Pakistani English interrogatives. They are sensitive to genre and context. Pakistani English novels and newspapers seem to reflect standard English structures. Pakistani English dramas exhibit flexibility and show declarative word order in polar questions and tag-question variation. In the context of variation, tag questions appear to be the most productive type in the extracted data. They perform multiple functions. The study concludes that the variation reflects the bilingual environment in Pakistan. It is also the influence of pragmatic force and the ongoing nativization of Pakistani English.

Keywords: Interrogative, Variation, Pakistani English, Polar questions, Embedded questions, Tag questions, World Englishes, Optimality Theory, Novel, Drama, Newspaper, Nativization

Introduction

The spread of the English language around the globe results in several localized varieties. Historical, cultural, and sociolinguistic conditions play a very significant role in the formation and development of these varieties. With the emergence of the field of World Englishes, these varieties are no longer considered imperfect or failed copies of British English. They are recognized as systematic varieties. They have their own grammatical, pragmatic, and discourse norms (Schneider, 2007).

Pakistani English has become an institutionalized variety. Colonial history, multilingual interaction, education, administration, literary works, and media have played a vital role in the development of Pakistani English. The existing scholarship on Pakistani English explores phonological, lexical, and syntactic innovations and variations. The studies by Anwar et al. (2020) and Ha-

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Corresponding Author Email: 25016102-005@uog.edu.pk

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lo et al. (2024) discuss lexical innovations, reduplication, variation in article usage, variation in tense usage, code-switching, and syntactic patterns. Recent studies also investigate tag questions in Pakistani English (Mahmood & Hussain, 2012; Hussain et al., 2021). However, interrogative forms in Pakistani English have attracted less scholarly attention. There is a need to study them in detail and address them systematically. They need to be explored as a connected pragmatic and grammatical subsystem in Pakistani English. question forms do not only seek information in a simple and straightforward way. They are dynamic structures that perform various functions in their contexts. They express politeness, organize conversation, challenge authority, and manage interpersonal relationships.

Polar questions, embedded questions, and tag questions are very important sites to study variation (Westphal, 2021). Pakistani English exists in a multilingual environment. Therefore, it provides a rich context to study variation in the categories of questions. Pakistani English is influenced by Urdu and other regional languages. Therefore, the present study intends to investigate variation in polar, embedded, and tag questions in Pakistani English. Explicitly, the study focuses on syntactic and pragmatic variation in the structures of these three interrogative forms. It also investigates the divergence of these Pakistani English questions from British English norms. The variation may be influenced by the Urdu Language and other regional languages.

To conduct the study, the data were extracted from selected Pakistani English novels, dramas, and newspapers. These three genres provide diverse communicative contexts and different levels of formality. This study is informed by World Englishes scholarship. To explicate variation in the question forms of Pakistani English, this study employs Optimality Theory (Prince & Smolensky, 2004). The expected variation in interrogative structures and their functions should not be taken as a deviation. It is part of the internal development of Pakistani English. This interrogative variation is not descriptive in simple terms. It is the result of the interaction between the constraints of structure, economy, and pragmatic force. The study argues that the variation in the interrogative structures of Pakistani English is systematic. It is also sensitive to genre and context. In this way, the study contributes to the field of knowledge and to the ongoing discussion in World Englishes. The following research questions guide the present study:

Research Questions

1. What patterns of variation occur in polar, embedded, and tag questions of Pakistani English, and how do they diverge from Standard British English norms?
2. What pragmatic functions do these interrogative forms perform in Pakistani English discourse?
3. To what extent can these variations be explained by the influence of Urdu and the process of nativization in Pakistani English?

Literature Review

Nativization and Syntactic Variation in Pakistani English

The study of Pakistani English has developed in the broader field of World Englishes (Anwar, Ajmal & Keezhatta, 2020; Noor & Anwar, 2021; Arshad, Shahid & Anwar, 2025). In this field of World Englishes, postcolonial varieties are recognized and understood as proper linguistic systems, and not random deviations. They are shaped by local histories, local languages, and the

native cultures. In this perspective, variation from British and American English norms is not a deficiency, flaw, or deviation (Anwar & Qureshi, 2019). It is part of the localization and nativization of English in new sociolinguistic contexts (Kachru & Smith, 2008). In Pakistan, English serves in many domains. It is used in education, administration, literature, media, and in public communicative practices. The national language of Pakistan is Urdu, and other regional languages are also used locally. Where English is used in many domains, it remains in constant contact with Urdu and other regional languages. This multilingual interaction produces identifiable language features that distinguish Pakistani English from exonormative models. Research conducted on Pakistani English reveals that these local features are not random deviations. They are shaped by bilingualism in Pakistan. Anwar et al. (2020) examine syntactic innovations in Pakistani English newspapers. Their study identifies several recurring features of Pakistani English, including tense variation, prepositional variation, idiomatic innovations, pluralization of uncountable nouns, compound subject structures, and variation in word order of reported questions. These features are connected to mother-tongue influence and the process of nativization. Their work is very important for the current study. It deals with syntactic variation as a recognized area of research in Pakistani English. It also notes that syntax receives less attention. In this way, their study establishes the rationale of the current study.

Another recent study supports the view that Pakistani English has developed into an indigenized variety (Shahid, Anwar & Amin, 2025). It has its own linguistic profile. Halo et al. (2024) studied phonological, lexical, and syntactic features in Pakistani English. They argue for structural simplification. Vocabulary and cultural expressions mirror the social and cultural embedding of English in Pakistan. Their findings are useful for the current study. They interlink variation with cultural and communicative contexts. This is highly obvious when British English may fail to fully communicate the meaning, and localized English conveys it successfully to the fullest. Sarwat et al. (2024) studied syntactic variation among ESL learners from different linguistic backgrounds in Pakistan. According to this research, the mother tongue affects word order, prepositions, modal verbs, subject-verb agreement, and question formation. The above-reviewed studies reflect the significance of studying systematic structural variation in Pakistani English.

Tag Questions and Variation in Pakistani English

Tag questions in Pakistani English have attracted more scholarly attention than polar and embedded questions. One study was conducted by Mahmood and Hussain (2012). They used a corpus of 2.1 million words of Pakistani English to conduct the study. They utilized Axelsson's model of tag questions to analyze the data. They examined tag operators, anchor types, polarity patterns, and pragmatic functions. The findings reveal that Pakistani English tag questions are accompanied by declarative anchors. Imperative and interrogative anchors appear less. Compared with constant polarity, reversed polarity is more common. It is interesting that Pakistani writers in English use standard patterns. They do not use non-standard tags. In the context of pragmatic function, the findings show that tag questions are used to soften statements. Another corpus-based study builds on this study's argument. Hussain et al. (2021) compare Pakistani English tag questions with those of British, Singaporean, New Zealand, and Indian English. It puts Pakistani English in a broader comparative framework. The findings indicate that Pakistani English relies less on variant tag questions than other Englishes. Though the patterns follow identifiable grammatical tendencies. These findings complicate the case that Pakistani English follows the patterns of standard tag questions and allows space for local structural and pragmatic adapta-

tion. There is enough space to explore tag questions in Pakistani English, as these studies focus solely on tag questions and do not situate them within the broader system of Pakistani English. In addition, these studies tend to describe functional and formal patterns without theoretical explanations. The present study addresses these gaps. It studies tag questions in parallel with embedded and polar questions and uses optimality theory to explain the competing constraints and their role in variation.

Interrogatives in World Englishes

The study of interrogative variation is not limited to Pakistani English. It has been an important area to study variation in World Englishes. In postcolonial varieties, the structures of questions show various patterns, including non-inversion, invariant tags, and discourse particles. They also show locally shaped pragmatic functions. Westphal (2021) conducted a study investigating the use of question tags in New Englishes. He illustrates that invariant and locally adapted question tags are important and can play crucial discourse-pragmatic roles. He explicates that tag questions are not merely syntactic appendages. They are interactional resources. They are used to establish a stance. They function as confirmation and interpersonal alignment. These insights are highly relevant in the context of Pakistani English. In Pakistani English, tags such as “*na*”, “*no*”, and invariant tags may perform significant pragmatic functions, although they differ from canonical patterns of British English. Westphal takes his argument forward in another study that he conducted in 2022. Westphal’s (2022) study of Nigerian English further strengthens the line of argument presented in the 2021 study. He examined question tags in multilingual pragmatic settings. He argues that New Englishes often develop localized tag systems. These tag systems are shaped by language contact and communicative needs. This study provides a comparative framework for the present study. Pakistani English interrogatives are locally meaningful forms. They are not deficient versions of British English. Lifang et al. (2023), in their study of British university seminars, find that tag questions serve a range of interpersonal functions. These interpersonal functions include: rapport building, speaker certainty, interactional control, and rhetorical emphasis. The findings of this study are significant in suggesting that pragmatic analysis of Pakistani English should go beyond the narrow category of confirmation-seeking. There is a need to pay more attention to other pragmatic roles, such as solidarity, stance-taking, emphasis, mitigation, and politeness.

Another study deals with the wider typological and World Englishes perspective on interrogatives. Siemund’s (2013) discussion on interrogatives situates polar questions, wh-questions, tag questions, and embedded questions in a broader cross-varietal context. It illustrates that subject-auxiliary inversion is not a universal fact and phenomenon in world Englishes. Though it is central to the standard English interrogatives. This point is directly pertinent to the Pakistani English polar and embedded questions. The speakers can ask a question in declarative form, like a polar question. They may also retain the main clause word order in embedded questions. Such structures may be understood not as errors but as part of a more pervasive variation that can be identified in multilingual environments.

Polar and Embedded Questions

Polar and embedded questions in Pakistani English received less attention than tag questions. Existing scholarly works on Pakistani English occasionally note variation in question structures.

These observations appear to be part of wider discussions about syntactic innovations. They are not the detailed studies of interrogative structures. For example, the study by Anwar et al. (2020) examines the position of auxiliaries in reported questions, among other syntactic features, in Pakistani English newspapers. There is a need to conduct a detailed study on interrogative types, inversion patterns, and auxiliary behavior. This indicates a gap to investigate polar and embedded questions as part of a wider and coherent interrogative system of Pakistani English. Research in second language acquisition also signals the importance of this gap. Pervaiz et al. (2021) have conducted a study to examine the acquisition of the English *wh*-questions by Urdu-speaking learners. They demonstrate that differences between the structures of Urdu and English pose a problem for the acquisition of *wh*-movement and subject-auxiliary inversion. There is no need for auxiliary inversion in Urdu as in English, hence there might be variation in the question formation common among Pakistani English learners when transferring or adopting a structural pattern from Urdu to English and vice versa. While learner acquisition and Pakistani English variation differ, this study helps explain why inversion and word order are particularly interesting in interrogatives in Pakistani English.

The present work thus considers both polar questions and embedded questions to be an important part of the grammar of Pakistani English interrogatives. The relevance of polar questions is that they can be used to examine the word order of the declarative sentence form, auxiliary omission, and subject-auxiliary inversion. The embedded questions are also significant because they determine whether speakers can distinguish the word order of the interrogative main clause from that of the subordinate clause and the declarative sentence. These types, along with the tag questions, enable a systematic study of the interrogative variation in terms of structure and function in Pakistani English.

The Principle of Optimality Theory and Syntactic Variation

Optimality theory offers a useful framework for explaining why certain interrogative structures or patterns emerge in Pakistani English. Optimality theory was first introduced by Prince and Smolensky (1993). Optimality Theory views grammar as the ranking of universal and violable constraints. This model presupposes that variation across varieties of a language, or across languages, is not the consequence of the presence or absence of strict rules. It is due to the different constraint hierarchies. It reflects differences in the ranking of competing constraints. According to Wunderlich (2006), optimality theory was originally developed for phonology. Then it was extended to syntax and morphology. He explicates that constraints do not necessarily have to be equally weighted. They are ranked hierarchically. These constraints frequently conflict with one another. Therefore, different rankings yield different grammatical outcomes across languages and language varieties. The differences in constraint rankings help to explain differences in grammar and languages.

Optimality theory is pertinent for interrogatives and their preferred structures. It has been used in existing work on syntactic movement, *wh*-movement, *do*-support, and subject-auxiliary inversion. Grimshaw (1997) provides an influential and basic OT description of the structure of English sentences. He includes interrogatives. In her model, the structures of candidate sentences compete with one another under constraints on movement avoidance and operator placement. The analysis of Grimshaw's (1997) work, OT approach to syntax, by Wunderlich (2006) explicates that English interrogatives can be resolved under conflicting factors like STAY, OP-SPEC,

and OBL-HD. Within the context of this framework, the movement of Standard English interrogatives is obligatory. It is due to the necessity of higher-ranked constraints. They demand the proper positioning of operators and heads, even though movement violates economy-based constraints. Economy says that there should be less movement. But it is violated due to higher-ranked constraints. This framework is very helpful to explain and analyze the variation of interrogative sentences in Pakistani English. For instance, “You are coming?” can be associated with the ranking where economy/movement avoidance is more important than a constraint that necessitates subject-auxiliary inversion. Likewise, questions embedded with an interrogative main clause “I don’t know where he is” can be interpreted and understood as an extension of the main clause interrogative ordering in an embedded clause. This suggests a tension between the two sets of constraints: favoring interrogative marking and those requiring declarative order on embedded clauses. Tag questions can also be well explained and analyzed with the help of this framework. Invariant forms of tag questions like “isn’t it”, “no?”, or “na?” can be justified as a pragmatic force/economy effect over the strict grammatical agreement between anchor and tag. Optimality theory, in this way, takes the analysis beyond description alone. It can explain and model the interrogatives of Pakistani English in terms of the competing structural and pragmatic pressures.

Research Gap

The review of existing studies in the related area points to three important observations. In the first place, Pakistani English is now an established variety that is widely recognized as a post-colonial variety, and it is shaped by nativization, multilingual contact, and local practices in communication. Its syntactic features reflect these processes, and not deviation from British English norms. Second, existing studies, in the context of Pakistani English interrogatives, have mainly focused on tag questions. They give useful formal and functional descriptions. But they usually examine tag questions in isolation from other interrogative structures. In the third place, scholarship on New Englishes accentuates that interrogative variation in tag systems is linked to discourse-pragmatic functions and local identities. Question forms are not only used for grammatical purposes. They serve many other functions. They carry interactional, interpersonal, and culturally specific meanings. These are very valuable contributions. Despite these contributions, an important gap remains. There is a need to study polar questions, embedded questions, and tag questions together as a part of broader interrogative subsystems in the context of Pakistani English. Existing studies either address the syntax of Pakistani English in general terms or deal with tag questions in isolation. In addition, theoretical modeling of interrogative variation receives very little attention. Variation is described in simple terms. Theoretical explanation has not yet been provided for Pakistani English interrogatives. The present study intends to fill this gap. It intends to bring together syntactic analysis of interrogative structures, their pragmatic interpretations, and their explanations, drawing on optimality theory.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopts mixed-methods research design, with a dominant qualitative component. The study examines syntactic and pragmatic variation of interrogative structures in Pakistani English. The study examines interrogative forms, their structural organization, discourse functions, and

their theoretical explanations. Qualitative research allows for closer and deeper analysis of the structures of the interrogatives and their conveyed pragmatic meanings. Qualitative and corpus-based studies of Pakistani syntax and tag questions have been conducted before by Anwar et al. (2020), Hussain et al. (2021), and Mahmood and Hussain (2012). The research method of the current study is descriptive, analytic, and explanatory. It is descriptive in that it classifies the variation in interrogatives in Pakistani English. It is analytic in a way that it compares the observed variation with the Standard British English norms. The current study is explanatory in nature because it explicates the observed variation by accounting for the influence of Urdu and the process of nativization. In addition, it is analytic because Optimality Theory helps analyze and explain emerging variation.

Data Sources

The data for the current study are taken from the three major sources of Pakistani English: Pakistani English newspapers, Pakistani English novels, and Pakistani English dramas. These sources have been chosen to reflect varying forms and degrees of formality and to represent interrogative usage in different discourse situations. Newspapers provide formal usage, as they are examples of formal discourse in which news is presented through editing (Anwar, 2012). Novels are typical examples of narrative and semi-spoken discourse. Conversational discourse with interaction-rich conversational data is typical of the naturally occurring pragmatic strategies in Pakistani English dramas. Existing research on New Englishes shows that interrogative forms, particularly tag questions, are highly influenced and shaped by discourse contexts and interactional settings (Westphal, 2021, 2022). The newspaper data is gathered from the newspapers that are widely circulated in English, like Dawn, The News International, The Express Tribune, Daily Times, and Business Recorder. The fictional data is drawn from selected Pakistani English novels by recognized Pakistani English novelists, including Bepsi Sidwa and Ahmed Ali. The dramatic language data is primarily drawn from Shahid Nadeem's "Selected Plays" (2008). The Pakistani English dramas involve spontaneous interaction, interpersonal negotiation, and everyday conversational exchange. The data taken from Pakistani English dramas is especially important for the study of tag questions and interactional interrogatives. Westphal (2022) points out that the use of tag questions and interactional interrogatives is more frequent and natural in conversational discourse than in edited written discourse.

Sampling Procedure

The current study employs purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is commonly used in research on World Englishes. It helps to identify and analyze context-specific linguistic features (Kachru & Smith, 2008). Text samples are selected because they contain relevant examples of interrogative structures in Pakistani English. The occurrences of the interrogative categories: polar questions, embedded questions, and tag questions are manually identified and extracted from the selected sources. The study includes the maximum number of interrogative examples in these three categories. Small-scale corpus-informed datasets have also been used in existing studies on Pakistani English syntax and interrogative variation (Hussain et al., 2021).

Interrogative Categories

The interrogative categories are defined to achieve analytical consistency in the present study. Operational definitions help maintain the analytical consistency (Siemund, 2013). They are de-

defined operationally with reference to the descriptions identified in English syntax and scholarship on World Englishes.

Polar Questions

Polar questions are yes/no questions. They are used to seeking confirmation or rejection. In Standard British English, these interrogatives generally involve subject-auxiliary inversion, for instance, “Are you coming?” Pakistani polar questions may show variation. For instance, they may appear in the form of declarative word order as in the question: “You are coming?”

Embedded Questions

Embedded questions refer to the interrogative clauses. They occur in larger clauses. One example is “I do not know where he is”. In Standard British English, embedded questions do not exhibit subject-auxiliary inversion. They follow declarative word order rather than main clause interrogative order. But in Pakistani English, embedded interrogatives may show variation. It may include the retention of the main clause interrogative structure in the embedded clauses, as in the question: “I do not know where is he”.

Tag Questions

Tag questions are short interrogative units. They are attached to a declarative statement. One example is: “She is coming, isn’t she?” These short interrogative units are used for various purposes, including confirmation, pragmatic softening, and interactional alignment. In Pakistan English, tag questions may reflect variation. It can be through invariant tags, locally adapted forms, and reduced agreement patterns. The common examples, as accentuated by Mahmood and Hussain (2012) and Hussain et al. (2021), include “isn’t it?”, “no?”, or “na?”.

Analytical Procedure

To achieve the objectives of the current study, the analysis is carried out in four phases. In the first phase, the extracted interrogatives are categorized as polar questions, embedded questions, and tag questions. These examples extracted from Pakistani English texts are compared with Standard British English norms to identify the differences in structures. In the second phase, the syntactic structures of these extracted examples are analyzed. In case of polar questions, the declarative question structure and the omission of the auxiliary are studied. In case of embedded questions, attention is given to the order of the clauses. In addition to this, and more importantly, the presence and the absence of the embedded inversion are studied. In case of tag questions, they are examined in terms of agreement patterns, polarity, auxiliary selection, invariant tags, and localized discourse markers. These categories are informed by the previous studies of tag questions in Pakistani English. In the third phase, the pragmatic functions of interrogatives are analyzed in their contexts. Special emphasis is placed on dramatic texts. This genre provides more information about the interpersonal functions than the edited written ones do in conversational interaction. The dramatists try to maintain the natural conversational interaction. Fourth, the selected interrogative patterns are interpreted with Optimality Theory. This framework explicates the ways interrogative variation may emerge from competing constraint rankings (McCarthy, 2008). Using this theoretical framework to study variation in the interrogatives is one of the major contributions of the current study.

Application of Optimality Theory

The study utilizes Optimality Theory to explain variation in interrogatives of Pakistani English. This explanatory framework is very useful to place variation as a systematic process. It provides a rationale behind the use of different interrogative structures. In OT, grammar is considered a system of competing universal constraints. These constraints differ in their rankings across languages and language varieties (Prince & Smolensky, 2004). The analysis considers a limited set of constraints that are related to interrogative structures. These constraints and their functions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Constraints and their Functions

Constraint	Function
INV	Interrogative clauses should display subject-auxiliary inversion
EMB-ORDER	Embedded should maintain declarative clause order
AGR-TAG	Tag questions should agree with anchor clause
ECONOMY	Avoid unnecessary movement and structural complexity
PRAG-FORCE	Preserve intended pragmatic meaning and interactional force

It is proposed that in Pakistani English, the constraints ECONOMY and PRAG-FORCE may appear to outrank the inversion constraint or the agreement constraint. Consequently, non-inverted polar questions, embedded inversion, and invariant tags may result as optimal outputs. OT-based work on syntax was proposed by Jane Grimshaw (1997). It was later discussed and expanded by Wunderlich (2004). The current study utilizes this approach – OT-based analysis of syntax – and conducts an analysis of interrogative structures to explicate the optimal structures in Pakistani English interrogatives.

Delimitations of the Study

The study is limited in the sense that it includes only three types of interrogatives: polar questions, embedded questions, and tag questions. It does not include all interrogative forms of Pakistani English. For example, it does not involve rhetorical questions, alternative questions, and echo questions. A very significant limitation is that the study extracts data examples from dramatic texts, which, although approximate conversational speech, remain scripted. This scripted text cannot fully represent natural and spontaneous spoken interaction.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Polar Questions

Polar questions are an important area to examine syntactic variation in Pakistani English. They include the interlink and interaction between the force of interrogative, the use of auxiliary, and the inversion of subject and auxiliary. The polar questions require inversion of the subject and auxiliary verb in Standard British English. For example, the sentences “Are you coming with me?”, “Do you like it?” and “Can you help the poor?” include subject-auxiliary inversion. The data extracted and examined in the present study show that Pakistani English maintains this standard pattern in formal usage of language. It is also observed that in dramatic and conversational contexts, polar questions appear in declarative word order and reduced structures. This

variation in polar questions of Pakistani English is not consistent and uniform across genres. It changes in accordance with the context, pressure of interaction, and immediacy of conversation.

Most of the polar questions extracted from Pakistani English novels reflect standard inversion as in British English. The representative polar questions “Are you angry?” (Sidhwa, *Ice-Candy-Man*, 2013, p. 34), “Have you made plans to go, brother?” (Sidhwa, *Ice-Candy-Man*, 2013, p. 138), “Do you think you could love me passionately?” (Sidhwa, *Ice-Candy-Man*, 2013, p. 186), “Have you no care for your wife and child?” (Sidhwa, *The Crow Eaters*, 2012, p. 14), and “Would you like tea?” (p. 101) reflect and retain canonical auxiliary position. These examples clearly include standards like sub-aux inversion. By the same token, Ahmed Ali’s “*Twilight in Delhi*” (2015) also exhibits a similar auxiliary subject inversion in polar questions. The examples “Anjum, are you awake?” (p. 14), “Have you seen my fan?” (p. 14), and “Where has he gone?” (p. 15) clearly exhibit that Pakistani English follows the standard pattern of polar questions. It is aligned with British English. These examples from Pakistani English fiction clarify that Pakistani English does not regularly abandon Standard British English. Canonical inversion remains stable in the written data extracted from literary discourse.

The polar questions extracted from Shahid Nadeem’s “*Selected Plays*” (2008) are different in their pattern. The genre of drama includes dialogue or conversations. In this genre of Pakistani English drama, polar questions come without subject auxiliary inversion. They come in declarative structure but not without interrogative force. They carry interrogative force. The representative examples extracted from the play include: “Baba, you put bleach in the tea?” (p. 28), “You think we can get relief from the law?” (p. 36), “You like the idea?” (p. 77), and “You know him?” (p. 82). These examples do not maintain the canonical pattern of polar questions. They reflect spoken register. The interrogative meanings are understood with the help of context, intonation, and situation. These polar questions are like declaratives with a question mark at the end. This declarative word order in polar or yes/no questions reflects the influence of the Urdu language, the national language of Pakistan. In Urdu, polar questions do not have inversion of subject and auxiliary. Interrogative force is communicated with the help of intonation and context. In this way, Pakistani English polar questions reflect a bilingual grammatical environment. It is important to note that these structures are not ungrammatical. They distribute interrogative meaning and force in context, syntax, and intonation.

Pakistani English newspapers are placed in the category of edited public discourse. In the context of polar questions, they reflect a different pattern. Polar questions in Pakistani English newspapers are more formal. They are also rhetorically controlled. For example, the polar questions “Did the world have time to brace for impact?” (Daily Times, 2025a), “Do you honestly this level of global trust just fell from the sky overnight?” (Daily Times, 2025a), “Is it not the time to hold India accountable?” (Daily Times, 2025b). A similar pattern is observed in the examples extracted from The News International. These examples include: “Is there a state operating within a state?” (The News International, 2024a), and “Will you stand with me?” (The News International, 2024a). Pakistani English newspapers maintain inversion that is aligned with British standard English. It is important to note that newspaper polar questions serve as a political challenge. They do not pose for a simple neutral inquiry. In this way, in Pakistani English, the surface level does not show variation. But at the level of pragmatic force, they reflect variation.

Optimality Theory is very helpful to explain the variation of polar questions in Pakistani English novels, dramas, and newspapers. With the help of Optimality theory, the ranking of competing constraints can be understood. INV is ranked high in British standard English. It results in the inversion of the subject and the auxiliary in polar questions. The Pakistani English dramatic polar questions reflect conversational discourse, and they rank ECONOMY and PRAG-FORCE higher than INV. The optimal result is that the speakers retain a simple declarative word order in polar questions. They rely on the pragmatic force and context to pose interrogatively. This declarative word order is treated as optimal conversational output. It satisfies the higher-ranked constraint of the economy. It violates the constraint of the formal structure of inversion and preserves communicative force. This is represented in table 2.

Table 2: Inversion Constraints and Communicative Force

Input	Candidate	INV	ECONOMY	PRAG-FORCE	Result
Ask whether the hearer knows him	Do you know him?	✓	*	✓	Standard formal output
Ask whether the hearer knows him	You know him?	*	✓	✓	Pakistani English conversational output

This analysis does not suggest a lack of sub-aux inversion in Pakistani English. The data analysis clearly shows that the inversion remains consistent in formal genres. But conversational settings exhibit the declarative structure of polar questions. In this way, Pakistani polar questions allow flexibility. They reflect both stability and variation. The variation is influenced and inspired by genre and bilingual environment. It is also encouraged by the economy of communication and pragmatic force.

Embedded Questions

Embedded questions are another important area to trace variation in Pakistani English. In embedded questions, there is no inversion of subject and auxiliary in standard British English. These interrogatives are embedded in declarative word order. The extracted data examples from Pakistani English novels, dramas, and newspapers reflect two trends. It is quite interesting to note that literary and dramatic language maintains the canonical order of embedded questions. Second, newspaper data shows inversion of embedded questions. One of the famous Pakistani English novels, “Ice-Candy-Man” (2013) by Bapsi Sidhwa, preserves the standard structure of embedded questions. The examples include: “Do you know what it meant?” (p. 41), “Do you remember where it is?” (p. 77), “May I ask who you are to tell Manek not to meddle?” (p. 146), and “DO you know what time it is?” (p. 186). The same is the case with the examples extracted from the novel “The Crow Eaters” (Sidhwa, 2012). The representative examples are: “Do you know what the sweetest thing... is?” (p. 8), “Do you know how much it cost?” (p. 113), and “Do you know what I did...?” (p. 168). These representative instances of embedded questions maintain the standard structure and align with standard British English. The novel “Twilight in Delhi” (2015) by Ahmed Ali has direct conversational questions. It does not have enough embedded questions. Overall, this novel confirms standard patterns in the case of interrogatives (Ali, 2015, pp. 14-17).

Embedded questions in the “Selected Plays” (2008) of Shahid Nadeem also confirm the similar trend like fictional data. The dialogues are compressed and conversational in their nature. But they preserve the standard structure. The representative examples are: “Who can tell whether it was poisoned or not?” (p. 29), “Do you know how difficult it was to keep it?” (p. 54), “Do you remember, Sabira, when we were children?” (p. 78), and “Do you know where Dilawar is?” (p. 55). These dramatic examples of embedded questions show the standard English structure.

Data extracted from Pakistani English Newspapers presents changing patterns in embedded questions. The previous research on Pakistani newspaper English reports variation in Pakistani embedded questions. Anwar et al. (2020) report examples of embedded inversions: “Khan Sahib, please tell the people that where is your generated electricity?” (Daily Times, 2018, as cited in Anwar et al., 2020), “She asked where were articles 62, 63, and 184(3)?” (The News International, as cited in Anwar et al., 2020), and “One such person stated why should they be...?” (Daily Times, 2018, as cited in Anwar et al., 2020). These examples of embedded clauses retain the interrogative order of the main clause. It can be due to the influence of the Urdu structure of embedded questions. In this way, a bilingual environment shapes the structure of embedded questions. It is also important and interesting to note that embedded inversion intensifies the force of the reported question. In this example, “Khan Sahib, please tell the people that where is your generated electricity?” (Daily Times, 2018, as cited in Anwar et al., 2020), the speaker is not requesting information only. The speaker is making accusations and challenging publicly. Optimality Theory helps to explain this variation of embedded questions in Pakistani English newspapers. Standard British English ranks declarative order the highest in embedded questions. This constraint is written as EMB-ORDER. In Pakistani English newspapers, PRAG-FORCE and INT-MARKING are ranked above EMB-ORDER. Journalistic language violates EMB-ORDER and preserves rhetorical force. It is presented in tableau form in table 3.

Table 3: Ranking of Pragmatic Constraints

Input	Candidate	EMB-ORDER	INT-MARKING	PRAG-FORCE	Result
Repost a question about presence	Tell the people where your electricity is?	✓	*	weaker	Standard embedded output
Repost a question about presence	Tell the people where is your electricity?	*	✓	✓	Pakistani English reported output

This tableau form only presents the variation found in earlier data. It does not mean that Pakistani English does not maintain the canonical pattern of embedded questions. The more recent data from Pakistani English newspapers confirms the canonical pattern of embedded questions. Like fictional and dramatic language, the present newspaper dataset displays a canonical structure. In the recent example “The pressing question today is not whether dialogue between the two nuclear neighbors is necessary...” (The News International, 2026), the whether-clause preserves declarative in accordance with standard British English. Another representative example is “Questions continue to arise regarding whether political considerations are influencing strategic decisions” (The News International, 2026). It demonstrates the canonical structure, whether + subject + verb rather than the inverted form. In addition to this, a report states that Hegseth “was

asked about Pakistani's future missile capabilities and whether India's Agni-VI missile programme posed a similar threat" (Dawn, 2026). Here, again, the embedded interrogative clause preserves the standard structure, with the subject preceding the verb.

Tag Questions

In the collected data, tag questions seem to be the most productive interrogatives pragmatically. Compared with the other two categories of interrogatives, tag questions serve many functions. They reflect a wider range of interpersonal functions. They also carry occasional structural flexibility. Tag questions in standard British English agree with the anchor clause. They agree in tense, polarity, and subject. For example, tag questions in the sentences "She is coming, isn't she?" and "You did it, didn't you?" align with the anchor clauses. It is identified in the extracted data that Pakistani English also exhibits the usage of canonical tags extensively. The novels and dramas include more canonical tags. But it is also very interesting that Pakistani English tag questions, as identified in the data collected, include same-polarity tags, agreement mismatch, imperative tags, and locally adapted forms. Tag questions appear to be richer than other categories. In the novel "Ice-Candy-Man" (2013) by Bapsi Sidhwa, a number of tag questions remain standard. They show a canonical pattern. For instance, the sentences "She's doing fine without school, isn't she?" (p. 23), "You're Punjabi, aren't you?" (p. 34), "You have stolen the jars, haven't you?" (p. 78), "We mustn't be selfish, must we?" (p. 125), and "It worked. Didn't it?" (p. 197) exhibit standard English patterns. They align with the anchor clause in all aspects. Another famous Pakistani novel "The Crow Eaters" (Sidhwa, 2012) exemplifies a similar pattern in the sentences: "You don't grudge her... do you?" (p. 20), "He didn't have much to live for, did he?" (p. 77), "Your mother look stern, doesn't she?" (p. 86), "You asked me to find out, didn't you?" (p. 89), and "You haven't met Peter's wife, have you?" (p. 197). These extracted examples from famous Pakistani English novels suggest that Pakistani literary English language maintains the formal structure of standard tag interrogatives. These tags are used to carry various functions like reassurance, accusation, teasing, evaluation, the expression of emotional reassurance, polite inquiry, and moral appeal. These functions are evident in the above examples.

The examples of tag questions extracted from the dramas are richer and stronger in their interactional roles. The play "The Third Knock" (2008) by Shahid Nadeem includes examples: "You are joking again, aren't you?" (p. 28), "You were a bright student, weren't you?" (p. 31), "You will come with me, won't you?" (p. 38), and "You know that, don't you?" (p. 38). These examples seem to occur in emotional situations. They reflect disbelief, persuasion, memory, and pressurizing reassurance, respectively. The same is the case found in the play "Acquittal" (2008) written by Shahid Nadeem. This play also shows similar patterns of tag questions. For instance, the sentences: "No, you haven't recognized me, have you?" (p. 52), "You women, you just went, didn't you?" (p. 52), and "Well, scared, aren't you, Begum Sahib?" (p. 53) show standard patterns of tag questions. The characters use these tags to challenge, soften, persuade, mock, reassure, and control other characters.

It is very interesting to note that dramatic language also includes tag questions, which seem to be imperative in their nature. The play "A Granny for All Seasons" (2008), written by Shahid Nadeem, presents such examples, including the sentence "Pick up, will you!" (p. 78). These imperative forms of tags seem to exist between request and command. The sentence remains imperative. But it is softened with the help of the tag.

There is another example of structural variation in tag questions identified in Sidhwa's novel "The Crow Eaters" (2012). The example is: "You'll live very long, doesn't it?" (p. 79). The expected tag here should be "won't you?" according to the standard. The tag "doesn't it?" is a mismatch between tag and anchor. It is an example of a generalized tag. It seeks confirmation. It is also used to maintain the flow of conversation. It is significant to note that this pattern is also found in New Englishes as reported by existing studies included in the literature review section. These kinds of invariant tags acquire and develop pragmatic functions.

Another interesting structure is the same polarity tag question. An example of this structure is traced in the play "A Granny for All Seasons" (2008): "You have second sight, have you?" (p. 78). It has the same polarity tag. Both the anchor clause and the tag are positive. Standard English generally has reversed polarity. Same polarity tags are used to show surprise, irritation, challenge, and skepticism. In the above given example, it performs teasing disbelief.

The data collected from Pakistani English newspapers has fewer examples of tag questions compared to novels and dramas. It suggests that tag questions are found in interactions. They are very rare in formal written language. Newspaper discourse is less likely to show interpersonal relationships. Novels and dramas have characters who interact with one another. Tag questions are common in fiction and drama because interpersonal relationships remain central to them.

The analysis of the extracted examples from novels and dramas accentuates that tag questions either confirm standard English patterns or reflect adaptation to the local communicative needs. Interactions in dramas are particularly important in this context. It is highly important to point out that tag questions in Pakistani English, when they seem to deviate from the standard norms, are not actually errors or non-standard forms. They are localized to the communicative needs in the context. Optimality Theory explicates this in a better way. It provides logic that works behind the selection of certain patterns that apparently seem errors or deviations. The constraint AGR-TAG is ranked high by Standard English speakers. This constraint requires agreement between the tag and the anchor clause. Both should agree in their polarity, tense, auxiliary, and subject. The conversational or interactional data of Pakistani English taken from novels and dramas, and particularly from dramas, suggests that the constraints PRAG-FORCE and ECONOMY may outrank AGR-TAG and other strict agreement constraints. This case is presented in tableau form below (Table 4.).

Table 4: Ranking of Pragmatic and Agreement Constraints

Input	Candidate	AGR-TAG	ECONOMY	PRAG-FORCE	Result
Seeking confirmation about the hearer's longevity	You will live very long, won't you?	✓	*	✓	Standard and formal output
Seeking confirmation about the hearer's longevity	You will live very long, doesn't it?	*	✓	✓	Variable output in Pakistani English

The degree of variation in the Pakistani English interrogatives is presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Degree of Variation in Pakistani English Interrogatives

Interrogative Structure	Degree of Variation
Polar Questions	Moderate
Embedded Questions	Low
Tag Questions	High

Conclusion

The current study examines variation in Pakistani English interrogatives. Explicitly, it deals with three categories of questions: polar questions, embedded questions, and tag questions. The analysis and findings of the study explicate and suggest that question forms in Pakistani English cannot be treated as standard and non-standard, in simple terms. This frame does not work to explain systematic variation in Pakistani questions. One of the major findings of this study is that variation present in Pakistani English is systematic. It is not random.

Polar questions found in novels and newspapers reflect the inversion of the subject and auxiliary. It is in accordance with the standard English norms. On the other hand, examples traced in Pakistani English dramas also allow declarative word order in polar questions. Embedded questions are stable in Pakistani fiction and drama. Whereas Pakistani English newspapers also show embedded inversion. It happens in rhetorical and reported contexts. The variation in Pakistani English interrogatives does not confirm stability across all three genres included. It differs from one genre to another. It is genre sensitive. Tag questions are especially significant in the context of the pragmatic functions they perform. They perform a wide range of interpersonal roles. The findings also accentuate the influence of the Urdu language on these categories of interrogatives. Optimality theory helps to explicate the identified variation in Pakistani question forms. In formal usage, INV, EMB-ORDER, and AGR-TAG are the dominant constraints. In conversational environments, ECONOMY and PRAG-FORCE are confirmed as stronger constraints. They outrank the constraints of formal usage.

This study is significant because it contributes to the related field of study. Explicitly, it adds to the area of Pakistani English and World Englishes. The study argues that the variation present in Pakistani English questions is genre-sensitive. The interrogative structures differ from one genre to another. It reflects the development of local norms in the English language.

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